

Lovestruck
Prince! I'll **Fight**
the **Heroine** for
My **Villainess**
Fiancée! 2



Shakushineko

Illust. by Yukiko





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Lovestruck Prince! I'll Fight the Heroine for My Villainess Fiancée! Volume 2
Shakushineko

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My fiancée whom I'm deeply in love is almost made to be a villainess, so the heroine side will be paid for what they did. Volume 2

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**Lovestruck
Prince!** I'll **Fight**
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My **Villainess**
Fiancée! 2

Crown Prince
Vincent von Weissworth

"This perfect prince on the outside is head-over-heels for Elizabeth on the inside. After a long years he's finally confessed his feelings to her, but now he has to fend off other contenders for her hand."

Duke's Daughter
Elizabeth La Montlivere

Surprised to learn her political marriage is a love marriage after Vincent confesses his feelings. She gets embroiled in the plot of Star Maiden after a fellwyrn takes a liking to her and the neighboring kingdom's prince proposes to her."

???

"A fellwyrn that breaks free of its ancient seal after being summoned and promptly goes to Elizabeth's side."





Baron's Daughter
from Orion

Lecia Yaloire

An exchange student from Orion. She has a cheerful and studious disposition. She came to the Academy with Leohardt.

Orion's
First Prince
Malius Berliose

Orion's crown prince who rarely shows himself. Orion's ministers are divided into factions supporting either him or his younger brother for king.

Orion's
Second Prince
Leohardt Berliose

An exchange student from Orion. His cute appearance hides his dark personality. He proposes to Elizabeth upon their first meeting.

Prologue: Vincent's Confession

TWO pairs of ruthless eyes glared down at me from atop their thrones. Father was clad in his royal regalia, and at his side, Mother wore a light golden dress. If looks could kill, I would be dead. All I heard was my heart pounding in my ears, and I nearly forgot to breathe in my primal terror.

Father let out a heavy sigh as he shook his head. If he said something, it was lost in the horrid ringing of my ears. Mother looked even more disappointed than he did.

"Vincent," I finally heard him say, "your cowardice has brought shame upon the entire kingdom."

"Shame, indeed," Mother echoed. "If you lack even the courage to confess your love to Lizzie, how could we possibly trust you with her future?"

A bolt of lightning split the sky outside the throne room's enormous window, followed by a boom of thunder. The room seemed dismally dark in comparison, casting deep shadows across my parents' faces.

Th-This can't be happening...

My gaze swam about the room as Father gave voice to my greatest fear.

"On Our authority as King, We declare your engagement to Lizzie annulled!"

"N-No...!"

"We shall adopt Lizzie, and with luck, We shall find a foreign prince to wed her."

"Yes. Anything for Our Lizzie's sake."

"Please, Father, Mother! I beg of—"

"Our word is final!" Father boomed.

An unknown force snatched the back of my clothes and dragged me backward out of the hall and into a darkness befitting the depths of Hell itself. I flailed for purchase, but my hands met only air.

Elizabeth...!

Alas, not even the name of my beloved could escape such absolute darkness.



THUNK!

“Wah?!”

I woke up with a sharp pain to my back. At some point, the darkness melted into my room, aglow with morning sunlight. From the crack of the opened window, I caught the twittering of birdsong, and a gentle breeze rocked the curtains to and fro. After a moment, I confirmed I was sprawled on the familiar patterned tile of my bedroom floor.

“So it was only a dream,” I muttered weakly.

I rubbed the bump on the back of my head as I took a few deep breaths. My heart was still pounding like mad, blood racing through my veins. The pain, however, was nothing compared to the relief that I was not falling forever. The nightmare had affected me deeper than I knew dreams could.

That...was a dream, wasn't it?

It was unlikely that my parents had utilized magic to invade my dreams, but knowing Mother, it was far from impossible. Even with my magic-nullifying Ward, I wouldn't put such a feat past her.

I sat on the edge of my bed and stretched in an effort to shake off my fall, but before I could compose myself, I made a puzzling realization.

How did I fall off my bed?

Since I had a lion's share of duties as a prince, my bed was fittingly large, complete with a canopy. Not only that, but three sides sported wooden railings between the engraved bedposts. I had fallen off the single unguarded side—the foot—onto my back. It was far beyond what mere restlessness could accomplish. No, it begged the intervention of some outside force. I thought back on how horrifyingly real the pulling sensation had been in my nightmare and how powerless I had felt in the air.

I broke out in a cold sweat. It was no doubt a warning. If I didn't act, I would lose Elizabeth.

Since the day I fell for her, eight long years of one-sided pining had passed. It was already the ninth year. Father and Mother

enjoyed watching me squirm over her, and I didn't doubt their willingness to meddle in my affairs. Worst of all, my servant and foster brother, Harold, recently announced his engagement to his longtime friend and colleague, Margaret Falming, putting the entire palace into a state of celebration. For some reason, the festivities were tinged with judgment. Everyone was curious when I would finally confess my love for Elizabeth.

Regrettably, Elizabeth and I lacked all the trappings ordinarily required of an engagement. We were formally a couple by virtue of our parents' arrangements, but I failed time and again to confess my feelings for her, and she likewise thought of me in a purely platonic sense. My parents loved Elizabeth far more than me, so it seemed plausible that they would disown me and adopt her straight away. The way I fawned over her in my youth backfired spectacularly in that regard.

We declare your engagement to Lizzie annulled. Father's words rang in my head. The sheer realism of the dream made it frighteningly easy to recall. It was nearly the end of spring break, and a new semester at the Royal Academy was on the horizon. I couldn't let matters lie as they were.

“...Wait for me, Elizabeth.”

I swear, when next we meet, I'll finally confess my love for you.

Going over it a thousand times in my head wasn't enough. This time, I'd do it ten thousand times. If that didn't work, nothing would.



ELIZABETH was clad in the most charming spring dress imaginable for our stroll through the royal gardens. She was covered from head to toe in delicate frills, and her hair was adorned with all manner of flowers. The garden pond was alive with the chirping of songbirds as the sunlight danced upon the gentle ripples. It was the perfect spot for my confession. The only thing missing was my courage.

“Look at those birds, Prince Vince!” she giggled as she pointed out a pair of waterfowl, her golden curls bobbing. Her gaze was full of benevolent love. “Do you suppose they're mates?”

I couldn't bear to lose her smile. I want to be with her forever. I need to become a man worthy of her love!

I took a deep breath, careful to hide it from her. I closed my eyes and cleared my mind. When I opened my eyes, she was still there in all her glory. I'd spent ten hours staring at her portrait the day before, and yet I was struck breathless as though laying eyes on her for the first time. In an instant, my worries left me. My mind filled with but a single emotion.

I love her.

"I love you, Liza."

Those words preceded my first thought, and as they escaped my lips, I was struck by how easy they were to say. It was hard to imagine that I'd ever struggled with it. She was a goddess, and I loved her. I was a fool to have danced around the topic for so long.

My lips parted into a soft smile as I let it all sink in. My only problem was my lack of confidence. I was so afraid of rejection that I never dared tell her. I had no reason to fear, however—whether or not she would accept me was entirely out of my hands. All I could do was tell her how I felt and surrender myself to her.

"Liza, I love you," I repeated, the words coming almost too easily after a decade of silence.

The answers to life's greatest mysteries were within my grasp, but I stopped myself from getting too carried away. I needed to know her response.

I met her gaze...to find her expression unchanged from before.

What?

Evidently, my words had failed to reach her. She was a tad oblivious at times, so I spelled it out as clearly as I could.

"I adore you not as a pawn of a political marriage but as the wonderful person you are. Elizabeth la Montlivere; I love you as any lover might for the woman I know you to be, not the merit of your title."

To avoid any confusion, I made it clear what type of love I was referring to. Of course, I couldn't simply force my will on her and keep talking over her. She was likely flustered, as she never seemed to think of me in a romantic sense before. There was no specific need for such a confession, as we were engaged nonetheless.

"I'd like nothing more than for you to love me the same way," I continued. "I want to be more than engaged. I want to be your lover."

Still, she didn't react.

"...Could you perhaps reply?" I asked hesitantly.

I leaned in closer, worried that she was ill, but as soon as I did so, her face flushed beet red, and she shied away.

“Hm?”



“Y-Y-Your Royal Highness! I’m so sorry, I... I...!”

Trembling from shock, she wavered and fell clumsily to the ground.

Chapter 1: Premonitions of a New Tale

THE chamber was bathed in darkness, save for the wavering flicker of candles at the corners of the magic glyph. Outside the window, the stars of the moonless night tried to pry their way in, but the curtain denied them passage. A single figure was in the room, the lapping candlelight illuminating his pale cheeks. His black hair melded with the gloom, and his eyes bore little sign of life. He let his wispy voice escape through cracked lips.

“Great Lord of Yore, progenitor of demons... I bid thee, manifest once more in this mortal realm. I offer mine soul to thee...”

As he mumbled the incantation, a foul miasma oozed from the center of the magic circle and crept across the room. It wound around the youth's body like a swarm of snakes. The darkness slithered into his very skin. As his gaunt form was overtaken, the poison seeped into his bones. Despite his groans of agony, a faint smile formed on his lips.

“Wait for me... My Elizabeth...”

The last thing his madness-blighted eyes saw was the image of the woman on the far wall. Then he lost hold of all that he was and was gone.



I'D finally done it. I told Elizabeth how I felt.

Unfortunately, she'd collapsed, red in the face. I'd hurriedly called her handmaid. She returned to her mansion minutes later due to her sudden poor health, and her answer was put on hold.

That happened a week ago, on the last day of spring vacation. Since then, she'd been pointedly avoiding me. We passed each other on numerous occasions, both in the hallway and cafeteria, but she never spoke a word. She averted her gaze whenever our eyes met. When I attempted to draw closer to her, she quickly distanced herself.

Whenever I attempted to call out to her, her bodyguards cut between us. Lady Margaret was always the first to intervene. She would give me a thumbs-up, having no doubt deciphered the reason behind her mistress's embarrassment—though apparently, Harold had lectured her over taking such an attitude for a good hour afterward. The other ladies were likewise under orders from myself and Father to protect her, but they were every bit as eager to come between us. I almost felt indignant at their interference, but I could hardly blame them. I'd do no different in their shoes.

Elizabeth was charming under any circumstances, but when she was blushing at me so self-consciously, her beauty surpassed all reason. She would dip her head, the look on her face a blend of remorse and unendurable embarrassment, as she hastily retreated. Between her golden curls, I could make out the vibrant red of her shapely ears. She was a pure blessing to behold. The cutest person I had ever laid eyes on. I couldn't bring myself to command her to stay and talk with me, either. Despite such an issue being a huge ordeal for me, I didn't feel like forcing a resolution. It was almost comical.

As a result, we hadn't spoken in a week. Her embarrassment was thoroughly burned into my retinas by that point. Closing my eyes was enough to bring her back in near-perfect clarity. I'd spend hours sitting and daydreaming about her, leaving Harold bored out of his mind as he stood at attention behind me.

I wonder if I could convey this memory to the court painter somehow. Oh, I wish there were a spell for that. Perhaps I should take up painting myself? I've been putting it off since I'd have a new sketch of her every day, but I can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs, can I? I'd start with a dozen portraits of her—of her blushing, her remorseful look, her curtsying, her beating a hasty retreat... I can see them all now with such clarity...

"Your Royal Highness," Harold coldly cut into my daydreams. "You're due to meet with the second prince of the Kingdom of Orion, Prince Leohardt Berliose."

I slowly opened my eyes. "Right. I remember now."

"His caravan was delayed a week, but he arrived early this morning."

I stood up, turning from the larger-than-life portrait of Elizabeth on my wall to the expressionless face of my foster brother and aide, Harold. He dressed me in a more formal jacket than usual

as I thought about Leohardt.

He was a year younger than me and blonde-haired with deep emerald eyes. He was a perfect angel of a youth—or rather, he looked like it. His...*interesting* quirks left much to be desired, but being a problem child myself, I could hardly hold it against him. Ever since childhood, he'd followed his elder brother Malius everywhere. The first time I visited Orion, he attempted to scare me off as if he were afraid I would steal Malius from him. We got past that and got along well...mostly. More or less.

The Kingdom of Orion was our northern neighbor. Since we were of similar size, both sides made it clear we wanted no blood spilled. We even visited each other on occasion and got along famously. Today would be no such casual visit. Leohardt would be spending the next full year at the Royal Academy.

I'd first heard of it during the spring vacation without any forewarning. Plus, his preparations had been delayed, and Leohardt wouldn't be arriving until the week after school began. It was highly unusual.

"Orion is in the throes of a political battle for succession, is it not?" I remembered Father musing, his amusement winning out over his worry. "We sincerely hope Lizzie stays clear of any trouble."

Father had concluded the brothers themselves couldn't be arguing, and the conflict had to be between other factions within Orion's nobility. Therefore, he seemed convinced that Elizabeth and I would be fine without his involvement. Elizabeth had five bodyguards just in case the worst happened, although I only had Harold. One of House Weissworth's codes was "Always Fend for Yourself," and I had no qualms with my relative lack of security.

Just as I moved to leave my bedroom, something lightly thudded on the plush carpet. One of my ivory buttons had broken and fallen off my jacket. The swirled pattern on it was split precisely in half.

I stared at it in concerned silence.

"I will prepare a change," Harold said, not missing a beat.

As he pulled the jacket off of me, I fixed my smile.

I hope nothing troublesome happens.



ONCE Father, Mother, and I were in the parlor, our steward ushered Leohardt in. He had grown a good deal more composed since I last saw him, but his face still held a hint of its former childish cuteness.

To my surprise, he wasn't alone. A wide-eyed young woman I'd never seen before walked behind him. She was attempting to hold herself with dignity, but she only succeeded in holding her head high; her gaze swam awkwardly about the room, and her lips formed a strained, trembling smile. The sight of her was piteous. Her black hair was tied back and had a midnight-blue luster, and her large, round eyes housed gleaming dark irises. She was unused to appearing before royalty, and the Orionian servants glowered at her from behind, as if questioning her presence.

Uh-oh. This screams trouble, I thought.

The Orionian prince put his hand to his breast, sweeping his leg back in a noble bow. "My deepest apologies for our delay. I, Leohardt Berliose, have arrived."

Behind him, his servants took a knee. The young woman looked around in a panic before hurriedly following the prince in a tilted curtsy.

I cast a sidelong glance at my parents. Plenty was on my mind, but it wasn't my place to have the first word.

"Who, may We ask, is the lady at your side?" Father asked bemusedly.

"My apologies for not announcing her sooner. This is Lecia Valoire, the daughter of one of our barons. I brought her with me in hopes you would permit her enrollment in your Royal Academy as well, in light of the immense promise she has shown of late."

"Oh? Is that so? In that case, Prince Leohardt, We shall allow it." Father then addressed Lady Lecia. "We shall have a room prepared for you at once."

"U-Um, thank you!" she stammered. "I really don't deserve such great generosity... I-I'll try to live up to His Royal Highness' expectations!"

Leohardt only watched her and smiled as she stumbled through the formalities, as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

By this point, I had too many questions and observations to keep them straight in my head. Father was likewise acting politely, yet he had to be puzzling over the meaning of this development as

well. Bringing a young lady for a year of studying abroad had to imply an affair—yet I couldn't imagine Leohardt, of all people, falling in love with her. There was a chance that he had changed as he grew older, but that was hardly cause for celebration.

I glanced at Mother to find her eyes alight. She could tell Lady Lecia had a unique quality to her, but I sensed how viscerally repulsed Mother was by her lack of manners. It was hard to tell what Mother would attempt to call out first. She had relaxed after I began acting like a perfect prince for Elizabeth's sake, but she was an absolutely hellish mother and mentor. Her closest-held belief was that perfect conduct was born from a perfect constitution. I could hardly count the number of times she tied me down with weights and forced me to run laps around the palace gardens.

I stepped forward. "Leohardt, Lady Lecia, feel free to ask me if there's anything you need. Whether it be about the palace or the Academy, I'll do what I can to accommodate you."

It was important to cut off any influence Mother could exercise over them.

The prince's reply not only accepted my offer at face value but surpassed my greatest fears in a single breath.

"Thank you, Vincent. I truly appreciate it. In fact, I've been hoping to encounter my future bride at your school. My type happens to be blondes with amethyst eyes."

Introduce me if you know anyone, he mouthed, yet no sound reached my ears. All the while, he smiled like the purest of angels.



PRINCE Vincent told me he loved me. As ashamed as I was to admit it, I couldn't grant him a response. I'd been unable to look him in the eye ever since. Every time I saw him—no, even thinking about him was enough to revive that memory.

"I love you," he said.

It had taken me embarrassingly long to parse the meaning of his words. I stood there pondering what he was referring to—the flowers or perhaps the sweets we had just finished—gaping at him like a vapid twit. He had fortunately realized my slowness and elaborated—lovers, he said. More than engaged. After hearing that, I became painfully aware of my own emotions.

“Oh, what do I do now?” I buried my face deeper into my pillow as I lay on my bed. It was plush enough to relax my nerves somewhat, but I couldn’t grow lax.

I love you too, Prince Vincent. I adore you with every fiber of my being.

I was unable to say those crucial words on that day, instead collapsing like a country bumpkin and forcing my poor maids to see me home. I’d felt miserable ever since.

It took an appallingly long time to realize it, but Prince Vincent was perfect in every way imaginable. The way he treated those around him with thorough kindness and the mysterious magnetism of his smile made spending time with him sheer bliss. I couldn’t believe I remained calm around him for so long without realizing how much he meant to me. I had to be terribly dull, yet he was the one who lifted the fog from my mind. I told my friends of his countless virtues time and time again. Thinking back, they must have realized my feelings for him before I did. The thought was mortifyingly embarrassing.

“They know, don’t they? They all know...!” I dug my nails into the sheets.

I couldn’t face him after his confession, yet my friends stayed by my side and supported me, giving me the time I desperately needed to take stock of my emotions. Through their actions, they assured me that I could take all the time I needed and that I was at liberty to speak once I was ready. I couldn’t rely on their generosity forever. At this rate, I was unfit to be his future queen.

His...future queen...

I blushed bright red, and my breath caught in my throat. Suddenly, I remembered Lord Harold and Lady Margaret’s engagement ball with startling clarity. I told Prince Vincent that I wanted to stay by his side forever. While he seemed surprised, he smiled and nodded. The thought was enough to make me weak, and I sprawled limply out on my bed. I wouldn’t have been able to stand if I tried. The mélange of embarrassment, shame, and surprise stupefied my body.

What a fool I am... If this is what love feels like, then I’m ill-prepared for it.

There was no going back, however. My heart was pounding too hard to deny it. No, I had to formulate a response. My first step was to grow accustomed to being around Prince Vincent again.

Oh, I know! I'll ask our painter to make me a small portrait of him, one that I can carry with me at all times...

With a start, I remembered that His Royal Highness told me he had an image of me in his pocket watch. Suddenly, it all made sense.

He is perfection incarnate, isn't he? He's in perfect control of his emotions for me and even hinted at his...a-affections in the past.

The thought caused my cheeks to warm once more. If he felt the same way about me, that would be such a beautiful, bittersweet thing.

"I must talk to him as soon as possible."

My pulse quickened just saying his name. It was as if I had become a heart myself. Every emotion felt so visceral, so painful. I had to overcome this. If I failed to, I wouldn't be worthy of His Royal Highness' love. There wasn't a second to waste. If I didn't have a portrait of him, then I would rely on my memories. Until I could calm the pounding in my chest, I would dream of him for a hundred—no, a thousand hours.

Resolved, I took the glass rabbit from its space on my shelf and wrapped my fingers around its sleek form. Prince Vincent had a matching figurine—his in the purple of my eyes, as mine was in the sapphire of his eyes. I bought them for their charming designs, hoping our relationship would last until the end of time. Clearly, I had loved him even back then without realizing it. Remembering his reaction made me squirm shyly.

"Please lend me your strength, little friend." I clutched the rabbit tightly.

I clamped my eyes shut and let him naturally form in my mind's eye. Even now, the breeze played with his flax-colored hair, and his eyes brimmed with a generosity deeper than the ocean itself.

My heart pounded out of control. My blood pulsed through my veins. I never thought one could feel the throbbing of one's heart, much less with such detail.

Tink. Tink.

I mustered all my focus to meet the gaze of my imaginary prince. The pounding of my heart quickened into a pulsating hum, and even breathing became a struggle. I feared I would genuinely faint.

Tink. Tink. Tonk!

“What...?”

With some difficulty, I noticed another sound at play and opened my eyes. If I concentrated, I could make out the thudding of something hard on the glass of my windowpane. It was too regular to be the tapping of a branch—no, the noise was purposeful.

“What could it be?”

I stood to draw the curtain and gasped.

Perched there, just outside my window, was a tiny black dragon. It was scarcely bigger than a housecat, but judging by the fangs jutting out from its tiny maw, it could pose no less of a threat to humans. It shook its scaly little body at the sight of me, rubbing its cheek against the glass in a show of affection.

I should call the guards. Dragons were long extinct, and if they had returned to the world, they had the potential to level villages, raze forests, and bring entire kingdoms to ruin. But for some inexplicable reason, I perceived no such legendary malice in the creature. Its pitch-black eyes were void of hostility, instead harboring a sense of adulation that felt disturbingly familiar.

“...Lord Lars?” I muttered absently.

My voice must have passed through the glass. The dragon let out a chirping cry and swished its tail amicably as if it were waiting for me to recognize it.



THE night after Leohardt’s brazen request was a long and restless one. Harold added insult to injury by asking if I had slept well first thing in the morning. It wasn’t without a touch of sympathy; he woke me more gently than usual, noticing something was off when I got up without a struggle. Often, I was so desperate to return to my dreams of Elizabeth that prying me out of bed was an ordeal. I was nonetheless better rested than had I not slept, and I dragged myself to breakfast without undue difficulty. There, however, Father had a rather disturbing announcement for me.

“We have heard Lars escaped last night.”

“Lars what?” I replied dumbly.

That was the last name I was expecting to hear. Lars Drewleid was the mastermind of the Star Maiden incident, a villain who plotted my separation from Elizabeth so that he could claim her as

his own wife. He was supposed to be under indefinite house arrest with his father, the former Duke Drewleid. Father remembered the youth's crimes as well, and since he frowned with such intensity, I was afraid to say another word.

"We must thank Drewleid for sending Us his account with such haste," Father continued as he handed me a letter.

It was addressed to my father from the former duke and accounted for his son's disappearance and the mysterious magic circle he'd found in a quivering hand. Most of the rest was all manner of apologies and insistence that Lars was alone in his escape. He even went so far as to say he would accept any punishment for his son that Father saw fit, so long as his own life was spared.

Ah, now I see why Father forced them to live together.

If one attempted to escape or interfere with the outside world, the other would report him without a thought. They knew it would be better to come clean as soon as possible rather than risk incurring Father's wrath.

Father is rather terrifying, isn't he?

"What about this magic circle?" I asked.

"We have already sent Dominic to investigate."

"I suppose we'll have to wait for his report, then."

Marquis Dominic Marshall was the head of the Ministry of Magecraft as well as my magic tutor. He was the best man to investigate the spell. In fact, his only shortcoming was that his son was a pervert.

"Do you have a plan then, Father?"

"No."

"So you won't do anything?!"

Father calmly bit into his apple, chewing carefully before replying, "We meant what We said. There is no plan to be had."

"Can't we send people after Lars?" Blood rushed to my head. "If he's escaped, then he'll target Elizabeth! You know that as well as I do. We must locate him before he can do any harm to..."

Ah. Now I understand.

Lars' goal was Elizabeth, beyond a shadow of a doubt. There was a 99.9% chance we would find him near her. Father had already come to that same conclusion.

At that moment, a servant's voice rang from outside the door.

"His Grace, Duke la Montlivere, and his daughter Lady

Elizabeth have arrived.”

“Ah, they’ve come,” Father remarked with a nod. “Send them in!”

The double doors swung open to reveal the duke with a deeply troubled look on his face and a very uneasy Elizabeth. Her eyes were focused on a small, black, scaly figure that flapped happily in the air above her head.

Is that a fellwyrn?!

“My apologies again for the sudden letter last night,” Duke la Montlivere said.

“Fret not. We know full well the importance a dragon’s appearance could have on the realm. We see you have gotten it to cooperate,” Father said.

Duke la Montlivere nodded. “It doesn’t want to leave my daughter, it seems. It won’t part from her side.”

“Good morning, Your Majesty, Prince Vincent,” Elizabeth said with a graceful curtsy. “I’m dreadfully sorry about the sudden intrusion.”

“G-Good morning,” I stammered.

As soon as I opened my mouth, the dragon glared at me. “Gweeeeeee!!”

That dark look in its eyes... It’s trying to intimidate me, isn’t it? That foreboding feeling I had was well-founded.

Lars’ disappearance, the magic circle, Elizabeth’s arrival, and the dragon before me—they pointed to a single conclusion.

“S-Stop that, Lord Lars!” Elizabeth stepped between us, spreading her arms wide to shield me as she chided the creature. “You mustn’t hurt Prince Vincent!” With a glance back at me, she realized she didn’t have the height to protect me from the airborne threat. “Y-Your Royal Highness! Quickly, crouch down!”

Oh, gods, she’s divine. My heart flutters so— Er, wait.

“So that dragon truly is Lars, then?” I ventured.

“Grarr!” It chirped, as if in response to its name.

It is him, then. So he sought out Elizabeth and poses no further threat to her. Er... He isn’t a threat in this form, is he?

Lars peered back at me with curiosity matching my own. I could see only the dullest glimmer of intelligence in his pitch-black eyes.

“I see how it is,” I mused.

Come to think of it, I hadn’t felt the faintest glimmer of magic

when he hissed at me—not to mention, had he attempted to harm me in earnest, Harold would have already beaten him senseless.

“You may relax, Elizabeth,” I assured her. “Lars poses no threat to us...at least, not yet.”

“Is that so? But Lord Dominic was unable to capture him. Why, you should’ve seen how badly Lord Lars scratched him.”

“But Lars still can’t use magic, can he?” I asked. “He appears to be a newborn dragon. I can scarcely feel any magic in him. That will change with time, of course, but we won’t have to worry about it anytime soon.”

Father nodded. “Dominic told Us much the same.”

Lars’ memories seemed vague and disjointed at best. He clung to Elizabeth and hissed incessantly at me, but he didn’t recall the deeper meaning behind his actions. If his memories and personality had remained intact, he would’ve likely waited and accumulated strength before stealing Elizabeth. That would explain why he conducted the ritual in the first place, and in the process, he inadvertently rendered himself powerless.

I narrowed my eyes at the petite lizard. “But a dragon? Hmm.”

He had thick black scales from head to tail. Only his eyes had burned with hatred before. Now his scales flickered faintly when he hissed at me. Every sign called to mind the legend of Ivliess the Burning Ironscale, a fellwyrms sealed away by a saint-king in the distant past when the entire continent was united under a single banner.

A fellwyrms. An ancient dragon of a bygone age. I’d read about something similar recently—in Lady Selena’s last letter. *Really, Lars? You’re going to become a fellwyrms?!*

I couldn’t blurt it out, but I was infuriated. I was the only one who knew, but the author of *Even the Stars Cry Upon the Holy Maiden*, or *Star Maiden*—which had caused me no end of trouble last year—was one Lady Selena. She had conceived a sequel. The first volume’s villainess, after being banished from the country, fled to a neighboring country and enlisted a cult’s aid, summoning a fellwyrms to have her revenge on the heroine and her prince. In the book, it’s a simple matter for the heroine to strike down the foul dragon with her star-blessed powers. This was reality, however—in some cruel twist of fate, Elizabeth’s sworn enemy now posed the same threat to us.

Lady Selena felt guilty over what happened during that whole Star

Maiden mess. *I can see her writing a new book in which Lars' humanity is restored...*

I let out a heavy sigh. It was too early for this, especially given how ill-rested I was. There was less than an hour before Elizabeth and I had to go to school, and we would have to persuade Lars not to follow her by then. I could only imagine the panic a dragon would cause at school. More importantly, we needed a concrete plan to deal with Lars before he gained his full draconic power.

Wait. School... I'm not forgetting anything, am I?

As I puzzled over a nagging feeling, the door to the dining hall swung open to reveal Mother, accompanied by Leohardt and Lady Lecia.

Oh. I remember now. Damn, this is bad.

Mother spotted Elizabeth right away, and a smile spread across her features. "Why, if it isn't Lady Elizabeth! Good morning, dear child."

"Good morning, Your Majesty."

Elizabeth pinched her skirts and curtsied as if she'd forgotten about Lars altogether.

Leohardt strode forward, stopping in front of Elizabeth to bow elegantly. "I believe this is our first time meeting, isn't it? I am the second prince of the Kingdom of Orion, Leohardt Berliose. Please, my lady, call me Leo."

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Elizabeth la Montlivere. Duke la Montlivere is my father."

Lars' eyes glowed red. "Hshaaah!!"

"Oh, Lord Lars, you naughty boy!" she chided. "Please don't mind him."

Unexpectedly, nobody batted an eye. Unfortunately, that was literally the case for Lady Lecia. The drake's hiss left her frozen, a look of horror stuck on her rapidly paling face.

Leohardt was unaffected. He doubtlessly concluded that the tiny terror posed no threat and didn't spare the creature so much as a sidelong glance.

"I must say," he continued in a voice like honey, "your name is every bit as gorgeous as your countenance. Might I have the honor of calling you Elizabeth?"

What? Don't tell me he really is into blondes with amethyst eyes?

I stepped forward. "Leohardt, Elizabeth is my—"

Before I could utter another word, he took a knee.

“Lady Elizabeth, might I have your hand in marriage?”

“Your *what?!?*”

My hopes and dreams shattered like fine crystals before my very eyes.

I must’ve misheard him... Yes, that’s the only explanation!

It was like my feet were nailed down; I couldn’t rush forward and stop him. Father’s words from that horrible nightmare echoed in my mind.

“We declare your engagement to Lizzie annulled! We shall adopt Lizzie, and with luck, We shall find a foreign prince to wed her.”

Fear struck me like lightning. I could hardly even breathe. Father watched this horror unfold as collectedly as ever. There wasn’t a hint of anger in his eyes, unlike how he’d reacted to Lars before when his scheme was revealed. My gaze darted to Mother and Lady Lecia, but they likewise seemed unwilling to contest Leohardt’s proposal. Harold—well, Harold was as expressionless as always. The entire hall was bathed in silence.

Don’t tell me Leohardt is a genuinely viable future husband?

Just when I’d finally confessed my love, Elizabeth’s adorable hesitation would be my downfall. I was a failure of a son, and at this rate, I would lose everything I held dear.

N-No, that was only a dream! I don’t have time to get mixed up in that silly nightmare now.

With great effort, I dispelled the glue holding my jaw shut, and croaked my objection in a thin voice. “L-Leohardt, Elizabeth is my —”

“Thank you for the most generous offer, but I refuse.”

None other than Elizabeth herself cut me off. Her voice rang out like a bell’s sweet chime. Her back was ramrod straight, and her smile captured a queenly dignity. It was a smile of humility and grace, the likes of which only a true ruler could produce.

E-Elizabeth...!

Just as I began to fear I was alone, she came to my aid. My heart raced anew as I held back tears.

“I am Prince Vincent’s fiancée,” she continued, “and I...um...”

Her voice trailed off as she awkwardly cast her gaze around the room. She seemed suddenly conscious of the attention she was subject to—not only myself, my parents, and her father, but Leohardt and Lady Lecia. Even the steward and the servants were staring at her. Her thin cherry lips trembled faintly, and her cheeks

flushed red.

...OH. I understand everything now.

She must have forgotten she was supposed to be embarrassed after my confession. In all fairness, I'd forgotten our awkwardness due to the fellwyrn trouble. Lars screeched indignantly at me as if sensing something unspoken between Elizabeth and me. I glanced back at my parents to find them covering their faces to hide their glee.

So they weren't silent because of Leohardt's confession—they were waiting for Elizabeth's reaction.

It didn't surprise me that they'd caught wind of Elizabeth's awkwardness. Some of her closest friends reported directly to them. Father noticed I was looking at him. He extended his thumb and index fingers, putting his hand on his chin. I hadn't the faintest idea what that hand sign meant, but I assumed he wanted me to wait for Elizabeth, so I stayed silent.

Elizabeth pressed her hands to her cheeks and took a few deep breaths. "I-I'm so sorry you all had to see that..."

Father and Mother shook their heads reassuringly as if to tell her it was their pleasure, but she took no notice.

"At any rate, I cannot accept your proposal," she finally continued. "I'm sure you will find another who can suit you better."

She dipped her head, signaling the topic as resolved—yet, instead of backing down, Leohardt took another step closer to her. He seemed more interested than ever.

"I doubt I could find anyone more fitting for my hand, even if I searched for a hundred years. Why don't you dump boring old Vincent and become my queen instead?"

Wha— How dare he!

In my indignation, I nearly forgot my place and called him something unfit for high society. Fortunately, he seemed content to keep his current—though still highly improper—distance from her.

"I can smell it in the very air about you, my love. You and I are destined to be! I...no, the whole Kingdom of Orion needs you!"

Finally, I stepped between them, casting Leohardt a dark look. "Enough. We need Elizabeth more than your country ever could."

If nothing else, she was the center of not only my life, but Mother's and Father's lives as well. Without her, even eating would be unbearable. The steward hadn't so much as batted an eye when the guard on her was quintupled—he knew how critical Elizabeth

was to all of us and let the royal coffers reflect it. Even Lars looked prepared to tear the foreign prince apart, hovering by my side.



The enemy of my enemy is my friend, as they say. Very well, let us fight together this time!

Harold also gave me a cold look of encouragement—or rather, something I hoped was encouragement. If Elizabeth left for another country, Lady Margaret would break her engagement with him in a heartbeat to follow her. He'd probably resign from his role as my aide and follow his fiancée. The thought sent a shiver down my spine.

I mustered all the princely dignity I could to glare at Leohardt. "You heard her; she's my fiancée. Not only that, we feel quite strongly for each other. She'd never take your hand."

I looked back at her to make sure my words weren't off the mark. What I saw nearly took my breath away. With both hands clasped to her chest, she blushed so fiercely that even her ears were bright red. Apparently, I'd gone a little far in laying out how we felt. She looked up at me with the composure her title demanded of her, yet her eyes bore hints of crystalline tears. It took every ounce of willpower she had to curb her bashfulness.

"H-His Royal Highness is right!" she echoed, nodding stiffly. "We, um...w-we love each other."

Good gods, how is she this adorable?! Not even Leohardt could see her like this and believe he stands a ghost of a chance!

Even Lars was struck by her look. He dropped to the marble floor in a daze. My parents again covered their faces with delight, but I could tell from their ears they were blushing as well.

No, forget them. I can't let another man see her like this!

There was a zero percent chance—a negative chance, even—that Leohardt would persist after such a display. Elizabeth was nothing if not a miracle worker. He was like Lars and me—just insane enough to redouble his efforts. The foreign prince had a decidedly less pleasant side to him as well. I couldn't risk it.

I clapped my hands, breaking the spell we were under. "Well, look at the time! We'd best get to school. Leohardt, Lady Lecia, I'll have the servants bring out breakfast for you right away."

And now for the haymaker, my princely smile!

With that, the servants sprang into action. The only one still out of sorts was Lady Lecia. Between being the lowest-ranked noble in attendance and witnessing her country's prince ask for an engaged woman's hand, she looked about to pass out, but she

composed herself enough to thank the servants decently. Seeing that, Leohardt begrudgingly took his seat.

"I believe Elizabeth should ride to school in my carriage today," I said. There had been too much excitement already, and I wasn't about to take any risks. "I trust I may have your blessing, Your Grace?"

For some reason, tears were gathering in the corner of the duke's eyes. "Yes, by all means. Thank you again for everything. I'll leave her in your capable hands."

It hit me. I'd professed my love for his daughter right before his eyes. We had been engaged for many years now, and Elizabeth had long been preparing herself for the throne, but realizing all over again that his angelic daughter would soon leave him must have shaken him.

My apologies, Your Grace.

I got the distinct feeling he was thanking me for more than this most recent exchange, but I made a mental note to visit him later and receive his blessing properly.

Father put a reassuring hand on the duke's shoulder, but he gave me a thumbs-up with his other hand. He could barely restrain his giddiness.

"Now, about Lars," I started.

"You may leave him in the palace with Us," Father replied promptly. "Your mother can manage him."

I sighed, careful not to let so much as the faintest crease appear on my face that might betray my emotions. I had no idea how he intended to "persuade" what was likely the second coming of the Ivliess, but it couldn't be that easy.

"You realize he's a fellwyrn, don't you?"

"Relax, boy," Mother said offhandedly. "You can leave him here with me until you get back from school."

With that, she snatched Lars up by the scruff of his neck, as though he were merely a kitten. His gaze darted about uneasily, but for whatever reason, he remained limp in her hand and made no attempt to struggle free.

...What?

I narrowed my eyes, making out a thin green aura around Mother's hand. It was mana of such high concentration that I could see it with the naked eye. It seemed to be some form of sealing spell, but I didn't have the faintest idea how she was doing it.

“Just who *is* Mother?” I muttered amazedly.

“She mastered no small number of martial feats in her youth,” Father whispered back. “Why, they called her the Dem—er, the Miracle of Urhalla.”

Er... Father? You were about to say Demon, weren't you?

I never knew Mother was so widely feared. The scariest part was how believable it sounded.

Elizabeth fixed Lars with a stern look. “Now, Lord Lars, you are to wait here. I shall be back for you soon, and we’ll discuss your future then.”

“Qwerr,” the tiny dragon replied sullenly, waving his little legs powerlessly in the air. He could no doubt tell there was no hope of escape for him.

To be fair, I understood his disappointment. He went through the trouble of conducting a dark ritual to assume a form of boundless power, only to get snatched up by Mother.

I suppose all fellwyrms are vanquished sooner or later...

I turned to our guests. “Leohardt, Lady Lecia, I assume I don’t need to tell you this matter is not to be discussed with anyone.”

“Naturally,” Leohardt nodded.

“Of course, Your Royal Highness!” Lady Lecia attempted an awkward salute.

Well. I hope that's enough trouble for today.



THE entire Royal Academy was abuzz with rumors. Having an exchange student from another country was intriguing enough, but the word that he was a second prince spread through the halls like wildfire. The most scandalous tidbit of the lot was that he had brought a baron’s daughter with him. Rumors about their relationship were plentiful—until Leohardt threw their theories into utter disarray. All it took was for him to announce he was searching for a bride.

“If I can find someone worthy of my trust, I’ll welcome them to Orion with open arms.”

The message was ambiguous enough not to spark a total uproar; whoever could win his favor could accompany him home. As one of the Academy’s key roles was to acquaint young nobles

with their peers and encourage them to marry, none could admonish his clear-cut aims.

I let out a sigh of frustration. Even if I couldn't officially stop him from picking up noblewomen, I could only pray it didn't lead to friction between our kingdoms.

"Harold. Do it."

"Already done, Your Royal Highness."

I didn't even need to tell him to look into Orion's current political climate. He seemed more than eager to do so.

It appears a little friction may be unavoidable after all.



THE bells chimed, signaling the end of class. Since it was the end of the second period, we had a longer break. I wasted no time leaving my seat. I had the worst feeling that the situation was about to get much more complex. Those who excelled in the magical arts became attuned to the flow of mana throughout the world, developing a sort of sixth sense for trouble. At times, I even faintly "felt" what I was looking for.

Sure enough, I had little difficulty locating Leohardt's classroom and peering in. A familiar gentleman with long, purple hair was perched on the second prince's desk.

"So you're looking for a princess, are you? You were smart to choose our kingdom, then. We've blossoms here of every hue. It's quite the paradise."

"Is it?" Leohardt returned inquisitively. "I'm rather glad to hear that from a man who's clearly well-versed in such affairs."

The man was, of course, Marquis Dominic's playboy son, Raphael. He was a competent mage, and he had all but assured himself a place by my side as a future advisor. He had an intelligent air about him, and his amicable attitude made him quite popular. His title didn't harm his attempts to pick up women, either. Around them, the gathered young noblewomen blushed.

Harold narrowed his eyes. "Shall I drag him out of there?"

I shook my head. "Er, maybe not."

Raphael and Harold were like oil and water, like fire and ice. I decided I had best do something before my aide took matters into his own hands.

"Raphael!" I strode into the room. "What brings you here?"

"Well, if it isn't Prince Vincent!" Leohardt feigned shock.

"What a total surprise."

Oh, come now. You both knew I was here.

Raphael stood up to bow to Leohardt, ignoring my question entirely. "I'm afraid I can't continue my introduction in such esteemed company. I hope we'll meet again soon."

"Likewise. I'd love to talk with you again."

I sighed. "Could you at least choose a different classroom next time?"

My sudden arrival had stirred up the first-years a great deal. They were self-conscious enough with a foreign prince in the room, but having their own prince, his foster brother, and the son of a powerful marquis all at once was too much for them to bear. They had enough on their plates as it was, what with having only just started at the Academy. As an aside, Lady Lecia was also in the room, but her nose was shoved so deeply into her textbook that it was clear she wanted nothing to do with the commotion.

"We're leaving, Raphael," I declared.

He turned to follow me out of the classroom obediently—but, of course, he had to turn and wink at the assembled ladies, filling the air with giddy squeals. Even some young men in attendance seemed oddly red in the face. At least they were all too wrapped up in the spectacle of it all to consider Raphael's true reason for being there.

The three of us continued down the hallway until there wasn't a soul in sight. I stopped, then turned to face my purple-headed friend with a sigh.

"So? What were you doing with Leohardt?"

The third-years' classrooms were in a different building altogether. There had to be a decent reason for him to come such a long way.

He smiled thinly at me. "Oh, I didn't want anything to do with that fuddy-duddy prince. I only wanted a glimpse of the new girl."

"Do you think I'm daft? I saw how you were talking with him."

"Hehe! Well, isn't somebody suspicious! Does it have anything to do with my father's sudden summons earlier this morning?" His eyes glinted like a hawk's from behind his monocle.

"You're perceptive, I'll give you that—but I won't be spilling the beans."

“What a shame. It seems awfully interesting, too.”

Oh, come off it. I bet you have it half figured out already.

I had no intention of telling him a thing, though.

He sighed. “If only you hadn’t forbidden me from meeting your dear fiancée.”

That was why. I wasn’t about to let a notorious philanderer like him anywhere near Elizabeth, even if he had his sights set on a different mark—especially since he was sniffing around Lady Lecia so readily. If I mentioned Lars, the trail would lead him straight to Elizabeth.

He chuckled knowingly, as if he could tell what I was thinking. “Oh, come now. You didn’t think I wouldn’t look into the new girl, did you? A black-haired, black-eyed baron’s daughter... She sounds just like my little Yulie.”

“Ugh...” I groaned reflexively, shooting him a reproachful look.

In the *Star Maiden* novel that had been the crux of Lars’ scheme, the protagonist was nearly identical to Lady Yulisse. She attempted to take the queen’s throne from Elizabeth until Lars’ and her plots were revealed and she was “entrusted” to Raphael several months prior. Of course, I wasn’t about to let anything slip.

“Did you know?” he continued. “That girl is an absolute genius with magic. She has plenty of high-quality mana about her.”

“She what?” I blinked in surprise.

“She doesn’t realize it yet, nor does Prince Leohardt. Isn’t that curious? I wonder what the King of Orion was thinking, sending such a valuable specimen away without even considering her worth?” He stroked his chin, amused.

Come to think of it, Leohardt’s supposed type matched *Star Maiden*’s villainess’ description to perfection. Add to that Lady Lecia’s innate magic talents, and it was clear their presence here would be more trouble than I bargained for.

Raphael winked at me. “C’mon, Princey, I know you need me for this one.”

I sighed. “I’ll send word if and when I need you.”

“Perfect!” he chuckled. He gave me a frivolous little bow, which an icy glare from Harold summarily straightened.



AS soon as school ended, I headed to Elizabeth's study room to pick her up for the ride home. She participated in a study group twice a week with her friends, though she told me she would tell them she was too busy to attend today. When I arrived, however, Leohardt and Lady Lecia were there as well.

"Won't you reconsider my offer?" Leonhardt begged her. "I assure you, Orion is a beautiful country!"

Elizabeth nodded reservedly. "I'm sure Prince Vincent will take me to see it one day."

The prince didn't notice the murderous glares of the noblewomen in attendance. His regal smile was powerless against Elizabeth. She was never the type to humor those she felt nothing for.

I can attest to that firsthand...

Harold narrowed his eyes at the pair. "Shall I interrupt them?" His voice harbored the same coldness as when he suggested dragging Raphael away.

Are you aware you're being classified as a playboy, Leohardt?

I shook my head at Harold before stepping in front of Elizabeth to shield her. "Orion, you say? That might make a good honeymoon destination."

"Prince Vincent!" Elizabeth called out in surprise.

With the calculated silence of a pack of wolves, the noblewomen fixed their hungry glares on me. They had a dangerous gleam in their eyes, a testament to the fact that most of them were trained bodyguards. I had stepped in to aid them, but I was honestly scared of them. *What is this buffoon doing?* they seemed to be asking, their question coming across crystal clear. I must have picked up mind-reading at some point. I shook my head, pleading ignorance.

I wish I knew.

"I've come to pick you up, Elizabeth," I said.

"Thank you so much, Your Royal Highness."

She met my gaze and relaxed into a smile as she gripped my hand. Mentioning our marriage helped her regain some of her composure.

How sweet! See, Leohardt? You don't stand a ghost of a chance.

Elizabeth's ease calmed her pack of protectors, who stopped glaring. She'd saved my life once again.

"Good afternoon," one of them said.

"It's been a long time," another added.

"It has been, hasn't it?"

Fortunately, Leohardt realized he had lost his chance and shrugged. Lady Lecia still stood off to the side, her notebook clutched tightly to her chest, as she watched us with a look of terror frozen on her face. She was all but a stranger to upper-class politics. Leohardt likely dragged her there without so much as explaining why.

"Come here, Lecia," the Orion prince called to her. "I have a second reason for coming all this way." He turned back to us and smiled. "Lady Elizabeth, would you mind admitting this fair damsel into your study group?"

Lady Lecia paled. "Wh-Wh-What?!"

"See? The girl is positively *bursting* with the desire to learn." He pointed casually to the book in her arms as if she hadn't just screamed in horror.

Joining Elizabeth's salon would mean building a relationship with her. I almost felt sorry for the poor girl. She had been roped into studying abroad with Leohardt, only to find that he was only looking for a bride. It was too much to ask of a mere baron's daughter.

"She's come all this way, after all," he continued smoothly. "It'd be a shame if she didn't make the most of it."

Elizabeth cast a glance at Lady Lecia, furrowing her brow. "If you're certain she's okay with it..."

"Y-Yes, please!" Lady Lecia nodded readily.

With Elizabeth's blessing, none of the other noblewomen seemed inclined to turn her away, and she was welcomed into the group.

Well, at least now I have another excuse to check on Elizabeth. I suppose that isn't bad.

I had no intention of humoring more of Leohardt's requests, though.

"I'd watch myself if I were you," I warned him. "You wouldn't want Prince Malius to hear ill of your manners, would you?"

That would keep Leohardt under control. He would never dare upset his brother. It was an excellent measure to keep him in check.

My threat carried unexpected weight. At the mention of Prince Malius' name, I heard the scattering of pens and notebooks. Turning, Lady Lecia tried desperately to cover her face. A bright-red

blush on her cheeks peeked out between the gaps in her fingers.



ON the way home, Elizabeth rode in my carriage again. As soon as we were alone inside it, she didn't talk and kept her face downcast to hide her bashfulness. I tried to come up with something to talk about, but the short ride home ended before I could think of anything.

When we stepped inside, the first thing I saw was Lars. Mother was holding him aloft and had a grip on his hind leg.

"Um... Mother? Have you been holding him like that this whole time?"

"We wouldn't want him running away, now, would we? He might try to find Elizabeth."

Elizabeth dropped into a curtsy. "Thank you for your assistance, Your Majesty."

It would have been easy enough to take Mother's word at face value, but I could tell that her true thoughts were something along the lines of: *"If I have to wait to see sweet Elizabeth, then like hell I'll let this scaly creepwad run to her side early."*

By her side, Lord Dominic gave Mother a baffled look. "Since morning?" I heard him mumble in disbelief as he took another look at the complex seal she was holding Lars in.

That's Mother for you. She's a true dem—er, miracle worker.

"Are you here to discuss Lars, Lord Dominic?" I asked.

If there wasn't anything to talk about, it would be easy to get a rough summary from Father.

Lord Dominic regained his composure and cleared his throat. "Yes. First, I must report about the magic circle I found in the Dreweleid residence."

The spell was engineered to summon a fellwurm. Since said dragon was captive under a heavy seal, it was impossible to drag it out so easily. Instead, it consumed the caster's body and soul to create a small breach in the seal, just enough for a bit of miasma to escape and turn one into a dragon.

"His body *and* soul?" Elizabeth gaped, paling.

"Precisely." Lord Dominic frowned.

In other words, it was impossible for Lars to be human again.

There was only a single fellwyrn in the kingdom, but that one beast alone was a great enough threat to warrant swift and deadly force.

Lord Dominic held up a hand to bid us be silent, his heavy brow furrowing further. "There was a second effect laced into the circle aside from the summoning, however."

How can there be more?

He paused for a moment to mull over his words. "The circle had a contract bound into it—a contract with you, Lady Elizabeth. The dragon is under your command."

Her eyes flew open. "What...?!"

"Normally, it would be impossible to bind a fellwyrn to your will. He made it possible by using a single golden hair in the reagents. I believe it belongs to you."

"Ah!" I exclaimed.

I thought back to Elizabeth's earlier words. When they were children, more than ten years ago now, Lars grabbed at her dress and *pulled her hair*. That argument caused them to part on ill terms and secured Elizabeth as my fiancée. But Lars still loved her enough to sacrifice all he was to become a dragon for her. He must have carefully saved her hair from way back then.

Eugh. What a pervert.

Irrked, I shot a look at Lars, who looked away as if he hadn't just been glaring at me. Evidently, he felt guilty even if he didn't have any memories of his humanity.

"That would explain why he headed to Elizabeth's chambers immediately," I said.

The contract was likely necessary to make sure the newborn dragon could find her, no matter where she was. A contracted monster was magically bound to protect their human with their life.

"That does mean he poses no threat to Elizabeth," Lord Dominic assured us. "And as he will follow her every command, there's no need to exterminate him."

I let out a heavy sigh, speechless. Lars' little ritual meant he had a firm grip on Elizabeth even in death. Having a dragon as our ally would be a great asset to our country, but should he ever attempt to rebel, Elizabeth would have to kill him with her own hands. Father would no doubt order her to do as she saw fit—that would lessen the weight of her choice if only a little.

"Well?" I asked her. "What will it be?"

She looked up at me, determination burning in her eyes. It was

clear she understood the weight of the decision before her. If she accepted the contract, she would be saddled with further responsibility. She didn't hesitate, however; she was never one to place her own needs over those of the country.

"Lord Lars will become my guardian dragon," she announced, her soft voice resounding through the room.

Lars, you lucky lizard!

I didn't let my jealousy show as I nodded sternly. The drake's eyes flickered crimson like crackling flames as he watched me, a distinct hint of pride on his face. It annoyed me to no end.

"He's yours to deal with, then," Mother announced as she released Lars. "The rest I leave to you."

He wagged his tail energetically as he flew loops about Elizabeth's head, like a puppy separated from its master for too long.

She curtsied to him. "I hope we'll continue to get along well, Lord Lars."

He puffed out his diminutive chest with pride. "Squeeeh!"

His long-fought bliss was short-lived, however. As I glared at the tiny reptile in envy, Elizabeth herself broke the mood. The moment Lars parted from her, she turned to face me.

"Y-Your Royal Highness? Um, please take this."

She shyly handed me an envelope with a faint flower motif embossed on it. The wax seal was devoid of the House la Montlivere's mark. She must have written it at school. At the sight of it, Lars froze in midair.

It was, without a doubt, a love letter.



AS soon as Elizabeth left to return to her mansion, I hurried to my room, letter in hand, my chest pounding. I hurriedly broke the seal and ran my eyes over Elizabeth's elegant calligraphy within.

Please forgive me, but I am afraid I need more time. I am not yet prepared to reply to you. You will see me next at the palace in two weeks' time.

Liza

The paper was otherwise blank. It was an exceedingly simple

letter that lacked even a proper introduction or conclusion, yet every stroke gripped my heart tightly enough to crush it.

"Liza," I muttered.

I clutched my chest as I stumbled into the wall. It felt as though my emotions had all escaped through a hole in the bottom of my heart. Even thinking was beyond me.

You may not realize it, but this is an answer in and of itself. I can tell at a glance. You love me, don't you?

She didn't recognize it, but the contents of her heart were all too clear. My words had reached her during our conversation with Leohardt, causing me to assume the letter would be a more direct confession.

Of course, it's not a confession. She's too earnest to reveal her emotions in writing. She first told me of her love through her actions, now through a letter, and finally, she's preparing herself to tell me directly.

I clutched the letter to my chest and collapsed onto my bed, my heart brimming with joy.

Oh, I love her so.

Chapter 2: The Second Prince's True Colors

EVER since announcing his search for a bride, Leohardt had been swamped by women. At all times, be it before school, during class, at lunch, or after class, there was no end of noblewomen convinced they were his ideal bride. Instead of giving them direct answers, he dodged their advances with sweet nothings, to the point where I was half-convinced he was taking lessons from Raphael. His actions naturally attracted the attention of the men as well, who regarded him with curiosity or envy.

Lady Lecia was almost never seen with him. Word had it that she had been pouring herself wholeheartedly into her studies, going so far as to spend even her breaks reviewing or previewing for her classes. Her grades were nothing exceptional, but the teachers admired her for her unshakable work ethic. Her eyes were glued to the blackboard all class long, and she was always the first to question anything she failed to understand. She also got along swimmingly with her classmates.

Leohardt and Lady Lecia acted in nearly opposite manners. Between them, I found myself intrigued by the latter's efforts to make the most of her studies, and I wasn't the only one to sympathize with and applaud her efforts.

When I arrived at Elizabeth's study salon to check on Leohardt, he was surrounded by her friends-slash-bodyguards.

"Good afternoon, Prince Leohardt!"

"Lovely weather we're having, isn't it?"

"I heard you're here to find a queen. Is that right?"

"Why don't you pick me, then?"

"Oh, yes! Lady Elizabeth already has Prince Vincent, after all."

"Why, those two are head-over-heels in love! There's no chance of you stealing her from him, none at all."

"You should focus on me instead."

"No, me! I would love to go to Orion!"

The noblewomen were forming a human wall between him and Elizabeth, one so tight it would be impossible for him to even

see past. They were all determined to prevent Elizabeth from being taken abroad. I wasn't about to stop them, of course.

Leohardt figured out their aim rather quickly, and his smile grew increasingly strained.

"Don't you see you're bothering the poor man?" Elizabeth finally said.

The ladies dispersed, but in seconds Lady Margaret led the charge toward Elizabeth, forming a tightly knit wall around her.

Impressive... I can't see her at all. Elizabeth hasn't even noticed me yet.

"Oh, my, we're running late for our study group!" one of them called out. "We'll see you again once we've finished, I'm sure! Farewell!"

The wall of skirts advanced on Leohardt, filling the hallway to the point where he barely had room at the edge before marching into their study room with military precision.

I couldn't even catch a glimpse of her.

As I let out a heavy sigh, Harold appeared quite troubled himself. It took me a moment to realize Lady Margaret hadn't noticed him either.

Leohardt chuckled. "Well, it seems I'm not wanted...or rather, they want Lady Elizabeth a frightening amount."

"It's both." I snorted at him.

Peering through the hall windows, I caught sight of Lady Lecia reading her notes near the back of the room. Her expression clouded over after a moment, to the point where it was comically obvious she was lost. One of the other ladies noticed, and after leaning over to peer at her notes, the lady pointed at the page and said something. Lady Lecia paused to think before beaming with pleasure, and she proceeded to dip her head again and again in profuse thanks. Even her impromptu tutor couldn't help but smile a little.

Ah, I see. So this is the type of charisma the Star Maiden was originally intended to have.

A complex, muffled feeling overtook me, but rather than puzzle over it, I grabbed Leohardt and dragged him into the adjacent classroom. I figured he intended to wait for Elizabeth to finish studying, so I had reserved the classroom in advance. It was a good deal smaller than Elizabeth's salon room, but Harold had supplied it with light refreshments. There were even a few of

Elizabeth's favorite sweets.

"Harold, could you—"

He put his hand to his breast and bowed. "I've already taken some to our neighbors."

"Nicely done."

He was only trying to please Lady Margaret, but knowing my darling Elizabeth was enjoying her snack nearby was enough for me. I had been training my mana detection skills as of late, and I faintly felt her in the next room. If I focused enough, I might be able to match every bite I took with hers. It would be like having an imaginary picnic together.

"Why don't you take a seat, Harold?" I invited. "There's plenty of room." I assumed he would want to follow suit and sync-eat with Lady Margaret, but he shook his head.

"I'm afraid I'm nowhere near as adept at reading mana as you are, but I appreciate the thought."

"Ah, of course."

House Abarakoff was more of a martial house, so he hadn't studied magic much.

However, the problem of Leohardt still had to be addressed before I could enjoy myself. I put a plate of macarons by his armrest and watched his every move carefully.

According to Harold's investigation, Orion could prove even more troubling than I'd thought. After First Prince Malius graduated from their country's Academy, he had all but disappeared from the public eye. Rumors spread that he was a cold-hearted misanthrope, and popular favor shifted to Leohardt. The result was a divide among the country's ministers. Prime Minister Duke Vilienne and the other more storied lineages sided with Prince Malius, while the younger and more ambitious nobles backed Leohardt, deepening the political divide. There were even whispers of a coup to place Leohardt on the throne and shift the kingdom's power balance.

Furthermore, talks of marriage between Prince Malius and the first daughter of House Vilienne were suddenly and inexplicably canceled. Rumors spread that the besmirched Prime Minister may side with the Second Prince or estrange himself from the royal family. Two short months later, it was decided that Leohardt would study abroad. At first glance, it seemed Leohardt was distancing himself from the politics of accession, but his claims about seeking out a queen were troubling.

I thought back to what Harold had said at the time: *“House Vilienne requested that the marriage talks be tabled. The reason is unclear, but it seems the first and third Vilienne daughters were arguing about Leohardt shortly beforehand.”*

It seemed plausible, but it would be a massive scandal if it were true. It would be a blow against House Vilienne on Leohardt’s part, as it would alienate both daughters from the marriage scene.

“But House Vilienne are not victims,” Harold had said. *“Apparently, the Prime Minister has been abusing his authority to horde manacite from across the country.”*

Between that information and Lady Lecia’s actions, it was obvious Leohardt fully intended to plunge poor Elizabeth into the politics of Orion’s government.

I carefully appraised the second prince as he brazenly sipped his tea. Elizabeth was my one and only weak point, and he seemed determined to force my hand by targeting her.

“You’re despicable,” I finally told him. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

“What, you finally open your mouth, and it’s to insult me? How cruel.”

Leohardt flashed me a saintly smile—a look of pure benevolence. It was too perfect to be anything but a sham. I’d made that same expression enough to know he was thinking the exact opposite thing. He was provoking me.

“I’ve heard *Star Maiden* is popular in Orion as well,” I said. “Prince Malius himself is a fan, isn’t he?”

“I simply fell in love with Elizabeth and wish to take her home. What’s so difficult to understand?”

“Hah. Yeah, right.” Even if it were true, I couldn’t allow it. “If you make so much as one wrong move, I’ll kick you out of the country.”

I glared at him for good measure, but he pouted at me.

“Don’t worry, I won’t do a thing... *I* won’t, that is.”

The way he looked at me sent a shiver down my spine. Looking down, I realized the macaron I was about to bite into had a crack in it.



THERE was no shortage of rooms in the palace, but only a precious few were fit for covert discussions. Most of the parlors had some peepholes in the walls to eavesdrop on suspicious individuals. Two weeks had passed since I received Elizabeth's letter, and I was searching intently for a truly private room. I couldn't risk Mother or Father listening in.

Ah, royals have no end of trouble, do they?

Fortunately, I found a salon I felt comfortable inviting Elizabeth into and arranged for everyone—including Harold and Lars—to leave us alone inside. I could faintly hear Lars whimpering to be let in from just beyond the door, but since he was under Elizabeth's command, he could only sit outside and swish his tail to and fro. The two of us were completely alone.

We sat opposite one another, and Elizabeth looked evenly into my eyes. Her eyes twinkled as if with starlight, and her cheeks were tinted a delightful shade of pink. The countless lights of the chandelier made her golden locks come alive with light. I could only wait with bated breath for her to speak. I made every effort to maintain my princely smile so as not to pressure her one way or another.

Finally, her lips parted.

"Y-Your Royal Highness, thank you for sharing your feelings with me the other day. I'm incredibly sorry I've taken so long to give you a reply."

"No, I'm sorry for being so abrupt. I must've startled you."

"Please, the blame is mine to bear. I... I would like to give you my reply." She took a small breath in, then out. "S-So..." She clamped her lips shut, then haltingly opened them once more before saying it in a single breath. "I-I... I likewise feel quite strongly about you, Prince *Vinshent*!"

I met her gaze, letting her every word soak into my brain. We sat in tense silence for a few seconds.

"Vinshent?" I repeated.

"O-Oh!"

She turned beet red and covered her face with her hands. Perhaps she was determined to stand her ground because she continued to watch me from between the gaps in her fingers, her brows knitting in consternation.

How is she this adorable? I felt like squealing aloud, but I could only stare at her. *What is this feeling? I've never felt so at ease. Is this*

heaven? N-No, forget that. I need to say something!

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to poke fun at you. It took a lot of resolve to tell me that. I'm happy, honest." I took both her hands in mine. Her eyes began to water.

"Th-Thank you, Prince Vince."

"No, thank you, my love. You've made me the happiest man alive."

"If you hadn't told me how you felt then, I might have never come to terms with my feelings," she said bashfully.

Never, huh? I'm glad I confessed to her when I did.

I cleared my throat. "That settles it, then. We're officially...I-lovers."

"Y-Yes, we are."

My cheeks grew hot, and Elizabeth's face looked red enough to start steaming. I could lose myself in her luminous eyes.

We could finally call ourselves betrothed in every sense, and there was no sign of this being some wonderful dream. In fact, the mood was wondrous. I could feel her trust and love for me grow.

Wait, is it time? Is it finally time?!

I tightened my grip on her hands and took a step closer to her. My heart fluttered with anticipation as she squeezed my hands back. I drew nearer and nearer to her face—

"I now understand how much I have yet to learn," she suddenly said. "I swear that I'll rectify this horrific dishonor."

The mood was murdered. I blinked in surprise.

"Dishonor?" I echoed dumbly.

"You see, Prince Vincent, I've been wondering what possessed Prince Leohardt to say such odd things to me. There must be some deeper meaning to it."

"I... Well, yes, I think so too."

Elizabeth didn't know I already knew the Orion prince's true nature. He was the last person who would talk about marriage.

But why bring that up now, of all times?!

"As your fiancée and lover, I cannot allow this to stand. Even if he is from another kingdom, to propose to an engaged woman is nothing short of an insult." Her gaze grew in intensity, as did her grip on my hands. "I must talk with him immediately. If he intends any harm to our fair kingdom, I'll stomp him out where he stands."

For a moment, I was genuinely afraid she'd stomp me out as well.

No, I've nothing to worry about. I love her to no end, yes, but not enough to commit treason or the like. If anything, she motivates me to be a better ruler!

"Let's go, Prince Vincent!"

Her hand was still clasped tightly around mine when she moved to leave, giving me no room to protest. She wouldn't be dragged into a political hell unwillingly—no, she was prepared to dive in headfirst, come what may.



ELIZABETH was determined to get to the bottom of the mystery. Since Leohardt was already in the palace, it was a matter of inviting him—as well as Harold and Lars—into the same salon we had just used.

Leohardt smiled sweetly at Elizabeth, and she returned a pleasant grin.

"I must be clear, Prince Leohardt. I cannot return your feelings. Prince Vincent and I are betrothed."

"I know. That's no reason for me to give up, though, is it?"

"It doesn't matter if you're a prince, you've no right to chase a betrothed woman so shamelessly. What are you thinking?" she chided him. "I must know why you would pursue a simple soul like me so doggedly. If not, you may well be charged with inciting chaos in our fair realm."

"A reason?" Leohardt asked with feigned surprise, the saccharine smile still playing on his lips. "Why, what reason would I need but love? I'm smitten. I beg you, take my hand, and we'll escape to Orion together."

His tone rubbed me the wrong way, as if he were trying to annoy us on purpose. He undoubtedly had no intention of answering us. I felt Harold's contempt for the man rising behind me, but I was too afraid to turn and check. Lars was likewise upset, snorting out gouty smoke as he glared at the foreign prince, but I wasn't afraid of the little dragon, so I ignored him.

Elizabeth dropped her gaze sullenly. "I see. It appears you're not willing to talk." Eyes still downcast, she gestured for Lars to come closer to her. He perked up eagerly and swooped over to her, tail wagging happily.

He's more dog than dragon.

As soon as the reptile was hovering beside her, she looked up and pointed at Leohardt. "I-If you won't talk to me, then perhaps you'll talk to the Ivliess himself!"

Ah. An intimidation tactic.

Lars caught on as well, and his eyes sparked like hot embers. "Grawr!"

"My little friend here is none other than the infamous fellwurm that razed entire countries overnight! H-He'll send you to the fiery depths of Hell!"

Everyone was struck silent. Metaphorical crickets chirped.

My, Elizabeth is a horrible actress. I've never heard anyone sound so thematically out of their league yet so devoid of emotion in my life.

For some reason, this new imperfection set my heart aflutter. The way she glared at him like a kitten staring down a rottweiler was too much.

"Y-You'll tell me everything right now! Please! If you don't, my fellwurm will probably burn you alive!" she said in her best intimidating voice.

Just when I thought she couldn't get any more charming! I had no idea that was possible.

A surge of emotions left me dumbstruck. Lars was doing his best to be scary, but the way his little legs dangled and swayed with every flap of his wings removed any majesty he might have possessed.

Leohardt's reaction was quite unexpected. It took him a moment to understand what Elizabeth was attempting, but his expression quickly turned to dismay.

"Oh, sweet Lady Elizabeth! Your words pain me like a rain of a million arrows! Do you truly hate me so?"

That was enough to turn my suspicion into certainty.

I knew it. He doesn't feel a thing for Elizabeth. If he did, his brain would melt like mine, and he wouldn't be able to say anything, let alone follow her dubious acting.

Elizabeth rapidly deflated. "W-Well, I wouldn't say I *hate* you..."

Oh, how precious.

I took a deep breath to collect my thoughts. I briefly considered playing along with his farce, but I couldn't afford to take such a risk. Matters of succession could get nasty, to the point of

destroying whole kingdoms. There was no guarantee that the fall of Orion would leave our country unscathed, especially since Leohardt seemed intent on drawing us into his problems. It was time to take a stand.

"Enough of the games, Leohardt," I said curtly. "You may as well come clean. Elizabeth may be merciful, but I assure you that I can be quite ruthless. I will not hesitate to put you in your place if you threaten our kingdom."

I did my best to come off as intimidating. A hint of relief appeared on Leohardt's face, likely because he would no longer have to deal with Elizabeth's supposed wrath. It may have been wiser to stop Elizabeth earlier, but I couldn't bring myself to criticize her.

"Prince Vincent?" She looked up at me. Our eyes met, and she nodded. The baton had been passed.

"Huh. I take it you'd like to get down to business, then?" Leohardt tipped his head to the side in thought, placing a finger on his lips in a childish gesture of deep thought. I recognized it. He had finally dropped his façade.

"That's right," I said with a nod. "I must protect this country with my life. Elizabeth reminded me of my obligation to do so."

To be precise, I mainly wanted to protect the country so that Elizabeth and I would have a nice place to live out our lovey-dovey lives as husband and wife, but he didn't have to know that.

"Excellent."

The air around us changed. His gentle smile warped and twisted into a cruel sneer. With a slight dip of his head, his bangs cast such dark shadows on his face that I could scarcely believe the chandelier was above us. It was no longer the expression of a young man, but the grin of the Devil. Not only Elizabeth, but even Harold and Lars were struck speechless with horror. The room grew cold, and a bloodcurdling chill ran down my spine. The nightmare I was sure I'd overcome returned to my mind with horrid vivacity, and I grimaced.

This was Leohardt's true smile—a face with greater darkness behind it than I dared imagine. It sowed more fear and discord than any war or plague could, forcing one to recall their deepest, most dismal memories. It was a look of pure malice.

Lars let out a whimpering yelp of warning as he plunged between Elizabeth and the devil-prince. His eyes were a solid,

glowing crimson now.

I can't blame him.

Harold seemed ready to strike at Leohardt at a moment's notice. I motioned for him to stand down. I had some resistance to that smile personally, as I had known Leohardt since we were children, but the others were susceptible. Elizabeth was the only one who didn't react visibly, though she was likely as shaken as the rest.

"Enough with that look, Leohardt."



“What face? I’m simply overjoyed that you’ve agreed to cooperate with me.”

“Oh, enough. I was only waiting to see if you’d show your hand.”

With a shrug, he returned to his usual reserved smile. The air grew lighter all at once, allowing us to breathe again. I couldn’t imagine how a couple as peaceful as his parents ever gave birth to such a monster. It was the greatest mystery since Orion’s conception.

Leohardt had always been a cute boy, and he acted perfectly pure-hearted most of the time. That only made the transition to his demonic grin even more harrowing. Rumor had it that some people were bedridden for three days and nights after witnessing it, and several of his tutors had met that exact fate. I’d heard that his smile wasn’t seen for a full decade after a cardinal performed a demon-purging rite on him, but it seemed he had merely learned to control it better.

“This, Elizabeth, is his true nature,” I explained.

“His true nature?” she asked.

“Yes. He’s an awful piece of work.”

Leohardt shot me an accusatory look, as though I wasn’t one to talk.

Granted, but don’t you dare say anything so incriminating about me in front of Elizabeth. And don’t look at me like that, Harold! No free pass for you!

“There’s one other thing you need to know about him,” I continued.

It was the strongest piece of evidence I had against his so-called “love” for Elizabeth. It also explained the elaborate mask he went to such lengths to maintain.

“Leohardt is a *massive* bro-con.”

The room was bathed in silence.

Leohardt had forged his entire life around the fervent belief that Prince Malius was a god among men. His sole fear was that his brother might learn of the darkness in his heart and come to hate him. He strove to be the perfect little brother for that very reason. To be fair, I understood his motives perfectly if I assumed he cared for Prince Malius the same way I did for Elizabeth.

Elizabeth seemed flummoxed. “A what-con?”

It seemed the meaning hadn't quite sunk in yet.

Oh, you sweet, ignorant thing.

"It's short for brother complex."

"Hmm... A complex is where someone develops an intense mental attachment to something or someone. Does that mean Leohardt has strong feelings for his brother?" she asked.

Good, she gets it.

I knew her ability to break down odd, niche topics so that she could understand them would be vital to our relationship going forward.

"How rude!" Leohardt huffed. "I'm no bro-con! Why, my dearest brother could steal anyone's heart with his magnificence! It would be odd *not* to worship the ground his perfect feet tread on!"

I shrugged at Elizabeth. "Told you, didn't I?"

She still seemed lost, cocking her head to the side with a hand on her cheek. Finally, it hit her. "Oh! I believe I understand what you mean. It sounds awfully similar to what I think of Prince Vincent."

I clutched my heart. "Gah?!"

The next moment, her brow furrowed with worry. "Oh, dear. I wonder if that means I have a Prince Vincent complex?"

Lars looked at her in horror before wailing and nose-diving to the carpeted floor, where he lay limp.

I can't say I was expecting such a heavy blow out of the blue, either... Try not to die on us, Lars.

I tried to calm my racing heart but to no avail.

Does that mean I have an Elizabeth complex—or rather, an Eli-con? Good heavens.

"W-We're engaged. It's normal for us," I assured her. "It's far less normal to feel that way about your own brother, though."

Elizabeth smiled at me. "Don't worry, Your Royal Highness. Even if we were siblings, my respect for you would never wane."

Leohardt clapped his hands, his eyes gleaming with giddy anticipation. "Yes, Lady Elizabeth! Finally, someone who sees the light! You've quite the head on your shoulders. You *must* come to Orion to bask in my brother's glory! Why, we could talk for ages!"

"Stop!" I shouted. "Don't you dare try to bond with her over something like that!" There was no way I felt comfortable with her going to another country to admire another man's virtues. "We're ending this topic right now. It's high time we got the conversation

back on track.”

Leohardt huffed. “You were the one who derailed it, what with that bro-con allegation.”

I ignored him. “Anyhow, you’ve made it perfectly clear you aren’t trying to steal the throne from your brother. I heard that Prince Malius hasn’t been seen in public for nearly a year, and just when he was supposed to be wed, *someone* sent the talks back to square one.”

Leohardt reverted back to his usual faint smile. It occurred to me that that might be his expression whenever he thought of his brother.

Come to think of it, he made that face an awful lot back at the Academy.

“I’m impressed,” he mused. “I didn’t think you’d be able to find out so much in so little time. My regards to House Abarakoff.”

“You flatter me, Your Royal Highness,” Harold said with a bow.

Few knew of House Abarakoff’s role in our kingdom’s espionage, but it only felt polite to show our hand a little. We did investigate Orion’s sensitive internal affairs, after all. We also required Leohardt to give us more information on his brother, which was naturally even more secretive.

He grasped my intent and averted his gaze. “Brother’s reasons for avoiding the public eye are simple. He wishes to preserve his genius intellect and astonishingly good looks for those who would truly appreciate them. In other words, he’s shy.”

Behind me, Harold nodded. His investigations had likely yielded the same results.

Prince Malius had only one weakness, and that was his extreme introversion. It would normally be a harmless trait—more harmless than any of Leonhardt’s many issues—but it was a massive hurdle for a man who would be king. He resented himself for it. He tried to overcome his fear of people on many occasions, but the harder he tried, the more his confidence came across as bristling malice. The nobles who sided with Leohardt in the political divide believed such a shortcoming could not be overcome, and they used the opportunity to their advantage—ignorant of Leohardt’s love for his brother.

Leohardt shook his head sadly. “They say Brother is distant this, heartless that... They’re all idiots. If they were truly loyal, they

would see that beyond his prickly exterior lies a heart of gold that could make any man weep!”

A “prickly outside” was a glaring weakness for a crown prince, and his actions didn’t inspire confidence in his court, either.

“Why, I took it upon myself to bring the hammer of judgment down on the unfaithful!” Leohardt declared with vigor.

Huh. I think that’s where his brother’s heartless reputation came from...

“Anyone who would nitpick their would-be king is essentially guilty of treason, to begin with,” Leohardt continued. “Even if I became king, I’d punish them all the same.”

That answers that, I suppose.

Leohardt’s supporters wouldn’t expect him to give them legal trouble. Orion was in jeopardy no matter which prince took the throne.

“It’s either the terminally shy first prince or the underage but ‘perfect’ second prince, is it?” I mused.

On top of that, I heard that Leohardt’s grades were better as well.

He nodded. “But what a leader truly needs is kindness. Regardless of how attractive a man may look or how intelligent he may be, there’s no disguising his true nature. Isn’t that right, Vincent?”

You know I’m in no position to answer that.

Elizabeth seemed lost in thought. The matter of abilities versus hearts was not an easy one, and I was glad she didn’t jump to agree with Leohardt. If she said a person’s true nature was more important, she would’ve broken my heart then and there.

“It’s a question that’s been troubling me.” Leohardt sighed. “Perhaps I *should* become king and hide my brother’s glorious figure from the world. And yet I can imagine him now, clad in his royal robes and opulent crown, looking down from his throne at my pitiful form...!”

“That’s what you’re really after, isn’t it?”

I realized how rude that sounded after I said it and clamped my mouth shut.

Oh, drat.

Casting a quick look around, Elizabeth was smiling somewhat stiffly, and Harold was expressionless. They were both put off by Leohardt’s claim. It must have been difficult for Elizabeth,

especially given how little exposure she had to sexual deviants. Fortunately, she seemed more confused than disturbed by the masochism dripping from his voice, so I left it at that. As an aside, I had no idea how to read Lars' expression, but his eyes were giving off an odd, pale glow.

"At any rate," I said, "I believe we understand the situation between you and Prince Malius. There's one more thing I must ask, though. What about Lady Lecia?"

I had a hunch, but I needed to make sure.

"Oh, I bet you know already," he said with a shrug. "She's a miserable liar—and regrettably, she's my brother's *lover*."

According to Leohardt, the two of them met at a ball. Prince Malius had been attending lower-ranked nobles' parties from time to time, keeping to himself as best he could while trying to grow accustomed to the crowds. He specifically avoided higher-ranked nobles' balls to limit the number of people who might recognize him. One night, he grew ill from the crowds, and Lady Lecia looked after him until he felt better. Prince Malius later claimed that was the first fever he hadn't regretted catching. They met a few more times at different parties, and before long, they had fallen for each other.

Because one was royalty and the other a mere baron's daughter, they couldn't announce their relationship. Prince Malius eventually went to Leohardt with his troubles, as dubious a decision as that was. Leohardt wasted no time whatsoever arranging to study abroad and insisting Lady Lecia accompany him.

"If she were at least a count's daughter, things might have been different," Leohardt lamented. "Why, he may well announce he'll become a mere minister or some nonsense, just so that he can be with the girl!"

"I would imagine so," I agreed.

I recalled Prince Malius' strained yet gentle smile. If Leohardt became king, it would be easy to grant the couple some land on the edge of the kingdom to live on, but that would mean bidding his brother farewell.

"No, dear Malius must remain the crown prince, and he must take the throne. Then we'll always be together—provided I never get married, of course," Leohardt concluded.

Well. That's a resounding 'no' to that.

Elizabeth got more confused by Leohardt's intense "brotherly"

love by the minute.

Perhaps this is one mystery you don't need to solve.

"Now that this petty court squabble has become a major ordeal, however, I must keep that meddlesome homewrecker away from him. If word gets out that he loves some country noble so soon after marriage talks with the duke's house have fallen through..."

"He'll be a failure of a prince," I finished.

Leohardt's worries seemed less significant when I recalled that he was the one who ruined said talks, but I decided not to bring that up.

Regardless, Lady Lecia's circumstances were clear. The only question remaining was Leohardt's treatment of the girl.

"You only needed to separate Lady Lecia from Prince Malius, didn't you? Why take her all this way yourself?" I asked. "Unless..."

Unless he planned to wed Lady Lecia himself.

Leohardt's emerald eyes lit up. "I could feel her intense resolve to protect my brother, to the point of sacrificing herself. If I had to marry, it'd better be to a sensible woman like her than some wretched brother-hater."

You'd better not be using the poor thing as some sort of emotional support dog. That's beyond cruel.

"Oh, and I suppose I told Lecia that my brother's accession to the throne hinges solely on her grades at the Academy," he added as an afterthought.

Well, that's more wicked than I thought. No wonder she seems desperate to study.

"So Lady Lecia wants Prince Malius to become king?" I asked.

She didn't strike me as the power-hungry type. I would've thought she'd be happy living as a peasant if it meant being with her love.

Leohardt grinned. "I took the liberty of telling her that's what my *brother* wants, and that he wants to rule Orion alongside her. She believes this is all preparation for her married life."

In other words, Leohardt was artfully manipulating everything she heard and believed. I genuinely pitied the poor girl.

"Once my brother becomes king," he continued, "anyone he would marry would take a toll on his blessed introvert's soul. Why not make it someone who has the abilities and resolve truly befitting a queen?"

Beside me, Elizabeth nodded. She herself was quite the

aspiring soul, after all. But our case was different. We were born prince and daughter of a duke, whereas Lady Lecia was only a fledgling baron's daughter. She hadn't been raised to rule like we had. Asking her to become a competent queen at this point was too heavy a burden to bear. Still, she was devoting herself to such a rugged path. She accepted it as her fate and devoted her being to that end.

I thought back to the shy young woman I'd first met, notebook and pen held tightly in hand. Her effort meant nothing to Leohardt. If anything, she was the wretch who threatened to spirit Prince Malius away. I wouldn't be surprised if he had her killed under different circumstances.

"So you believe she can overcome this trial?" I tried to put a positive spin on it.

He shrugged. "That fool believes she's more worthy of my dear brother than I am. For that, she deserves to suffer. It's really that simple."

He doesn't have a conscience, does he?

I let out a heavy sigh. At this point, it seemed impossible to convince Leohardt to take the throne; he was too twisted to listen to reason. It'd be easier to restore faith in Prince Malius.

"I suppose I can help Lady Lecia become a worthy queen," I finally said. "What do you think, Elizabeth?"

She nodded. "Of course, I'll help. I'll see to it that she becomes a proper lady." Her elegant poise was enough to convince me she could work the same miracle on someone else.

I think I might cry.

"I'll talk to Prince Malius, then. Perhaps there's something I can teach him, crown prince to crown prince." I turned and shot Leohardt a stern look. "That's all I'll be doing, though—and don't you *dare* involve Elizabeth in any more of your schemes."

If he did, I'd have him shipped back to Orion so fast that his head would spin.

In the end, this was similar to what Lars had put us through with that *Star Maiden* nonsense. The only difference was that Lars wanted to drag Elizabeth and myself off the throne, whereas this time, we had to make Lady Lecia worthy of it. We had to prove to the commoners and nobility of Orion that she was a *Star Maiden* in her own right. Nobody would be aiding her with comparisons to the fictional character this time—unless Prince Malius' supposed

enemy, Leohardt, brought a woman indistinguishable from the villainess from abroad.

I know better than anyone how weak the human mind can be to one's own imagination.

Leohardt smirked impishly, his childish features making the expression even more devious. "Hold on, now. Don't go making your decisions already."

"There isn't more, is there?"

I had a sinking feeling. Things always turned south when he made that face.

"I should mention that House Vilienne is after my life."

"They're what?!"

"I'm sure they'll try to kill Lecia too, should they find out about her. The youngest daughter of some baron would mean nothing to them."

Hold on, I'm not following. They're trying to kill him? Here, in my country? If something happens, it'll be our fault.

"Ruining the marriage talks ruffled their feathers." Shadows bathed his face in darkness once more. "They likely assume my brother will never be king so long as I'm alive."

Harold got ready to pounce on him again, so I signaled for him to stand down.

Ugh, I'm getting a headache.

"But enough about me. You already agreed to help Lecia, didn't you?"

Leohardt grinned sadistically.

What an absolute monster.

Chapter 3: A Saint's Resolve

AMID the field of spring blossoms, a horrible cry rang out.

“DIEEEEEEE!!”

A man sprang out from his hiding place, furiously bellowing as he charged at Leohardt. The prince didn't so much as raise an eyebrow. His composure caused the man to falter, and it was all over. A pink and orange frilled form flew at his face without warning. A loud, wet crunch resounded as her roundhouse kick connected. The man fell prone while his assailant bolted across the plain and out of sight.

As I watched her leave, I resolved to ask my fiancée if she recognized the brightly colored attacker as none other than one of her school friends.



AN hour later, the assassin was tightly bound and lying in a heap on the palace floor. Leohardt and I, his unfortunate accomplice, looked down upon him.

“Devil!” the man hissed as he struggled, even though the color had yet to fully return to his face. “You’ve brought nothing but needless chaos and disarray to Orion!”

I can't argue with him there.

What scared me, though, was that there weren't any visible injuries on the man. There were a few muddy patches and grass stains on his clothes, but nothing that would allude to the massive bruise on his flank.

Harold was scolding Lady Margaret, the man's assailant, in another room for using such an unrefined kick. It was one of those things that only a bodyguard couple had to deal with, as I couldn't see the harm in it myself. I almost pointed out that her petticoat prevented the contents of her skirt from being revealed, but judging from the murderous gleam in Harold's eyes, those would've been my last words. I instead smiled as best I could and tried not to

tremble visibly.

Hahaha... Oh, the lengths we go to for love.

Unfortunately, the traitor seemed intent on remaining silent, save for occasional verbal abuse. He clamped his lips tightly shut and fixed his gaze on the rug.

We had decided to catch one of the assassins after Leohardt so that I could confirm if the devilish prince had been telling me the truth. Lady Lecia opposed Leohardt being the bait, but after seeing how eager he was, she could only look on in horror.

Our strategy was to have Leohardt leave the palace “for a walk,” taking only Lady Margaret with him, in hopes of luring out his foes. An assassin took the bait, assaulting him the first time he was alone. All according to plan.

Interestingly, not one of Leohardt’s dozen servants minded the imminent threat to their master’s life. Even if one “accidentally” killed Leohardt, they were confident they could assemble a convincing alibi given their numbers. They were hastily gathered for the trip abroad, and none of them had any significant combat prowess. Lady Margaret summarily handled the lot of them before they could threaten the prince.

“See?” Leohardt shrugged indifferently. “Provoke them even the *tiniest* amount, and they take it so personally! Lecia wouldn’t last a minute back in Orion.”

To be fair, you played with the hearts of two of House Vilienne’s daughters and ruined their political marriages, both present and future. That’s not a tiny provocation. That’s a declaration of war. Trying to assassinate you might be taking it too far, but not by much.

“Are you sure Orion will be all right?” I asked him.

“Well, any and all faith in the royal family is effectively shot. Father takes after my brother in terms of moderate politics, so I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“You mean Prince Malius takes after His Majesty, don’t you?”

It wouldn’t be the first time a king’s indecision or attempts to please everyone riled the ministers. I thought back to Leohardt’s smiling parents. We had built a solid relationship with them over many years of politicking, and we were never threatened with war—though I wouldn’t count on them to aid us if we needed it. That was another reason why Orion’s ministers lacked faith in the nation’s future.

The assassin glared at Leohardt—a fierce, cold look free of

doubt. He was likely under some form of enchantment.

He won't offer us the name of his master easily.

At that moment, Leohardt stepped forward and cast a frosty look at the man. "House Vilienne ordered you to kill me, didn't they?"

That was blunt.

The assassin cursed under his breath. "I'm fighting for our country—we all are! Like hell we'd take orders from anyone!"

"Oh, sure, of course." Leohardt nodded and smiled sweetly. One could practically see the halo form over his head.

The man did a double take. He wasn't expecting his target to look so sweet and innocent. The next moment, Leohardt switched to his devilish grin. Even though I wasn't on the receiving end of it, I palpably felt the air in the room grow heavier, as if I had the Reaper's scythe at my neck.

The assassin balked, going white as a sheet. It took a moment for his terror to show. His earlier bravado was nowhere to be seen. The shock must have shattered whatever charm he was subjected to.

"Tell the truth, and I'll spare you," Leohardt said in a frighteningly detached voice. "If you dare lie to me again—"

"It was Duke Vilienne!" he burst out before proceeding to weep like a child.

Honestly, I'm impressed he could form an intelligible sentence before crying. I glanced at Leohardt's face to accustom myself to it. *How are those shadows forming, though? Is he using some type of dark magic?*

"What did Vilienne tell you?" Leohardt asked.

"H-He said it was a secret mission from His Majesty... He told us you were trying to kill Prince Malius, so we had to make it look like an accident while you were abr—"

"I *what*?"

A chill ran down my spine. His voice sounded as it always did; had I heard it from further away, I'd have thought nothing of it. I was close enough to him, however, to realize that the man's claim had *severely* upset Leohardt. He knelt and grasped the man's shoulder, causing tears to well in his eyes.

"S-Spare me! Please, anything but my life!!"

"You think I would try to take my dear brother's life? You thought that you would save him by murdering me, is that it?"

“P-Please, Prince Leohardt...”

“I applaud your efforts.”

“I don’t want to— What?”

Leohardt’s lips turned into a sweet smile as he patted the man on the head, cooing as a mother might to a child. “You were only trying to protect your future king, weren’t you? You didn’t know the truth, that’s all. I wouldn’t harm a hair on my dear brother’s head, now would I? Vilienne is behind this. Vilienne is the evil one. Understand? Don’t hate me, hate Vilienne.”

A faint glimmer of hope took hold in the man’s eyes.

“You want what’s best for your country, don’t you?” Leohardt whispered. “You want to sacrifice yourself for me now, don’t you?”

“Y-Yes... Yes.”

The man tried to sit up but lacked the strength, leaving him squirming on the ground like a giant maggot. Even so, his eyes were fixed on Leohardt, his expression showing newfound fanaticism for his master.

Leohardt turned to me. “That settles that. Do you see how easily he realized his faith lies with me? I’m sure his comrades are just as misguided as he is. Since I feel sorry for him, I ask that you consider that when you punish him.”

“What makes you think you can do whatever you want in my country? But I suppose you have a point.”

After all, I knew the perfect place to put the man.



BEFORE long, we were on the twisting cobble road leading out of the capital. There was nothing save the occasional patch of trees to serve as a windbreak. Our destination wasn’t far from civilization, and I soon spotted the grey stone wall surrounding the Norden Mansion.

The royal carriage made slow progress. Behind us was a second carriage, its curtains drawn fast, with Harold and the bound insurrectionists inside.

The horses slowed as we slipped inside the gates. Servants emerged to see Leohardt and me inside, while Harold’s coach unloaded its human cargo and carried the traitors away. They had been under Harold’s strict watch for several days and had been

mollified as a result. They didn't struggle as they were taken away.

"Well! I'm impressed," Leohardt remarked as servants hoisted the bodies away one by one. He appreciated the intense training Count Norden's retainers had undergone.

The servants bowed in thanks, causing the prisoners to start for fear they'd fall. They never did. The laborers were quick to adjust their load.

House Norden was the most storied family of knights in the realm, and they held discipline and loyalty in the highest regard. As a result, they were a bunch of muscleheads, so to speak. They employed only servants who shared their rigorous ideals. It was the best place for traitors who might threaten a diplomatic issue with Orion.

By the time Leohardt and I arrived in the parlor, the traitors had been roughly deposited on the floor.

"Your Royal Highness, you honor us with your visit!" Count Norden's voice boomed as he bowed deeply to each of us in turn. "We offer you the humblest of greetings as well, Prince Leohardt. I am Zachary Norden, the present patriarch of House Norden."

Behind the count, I spotted his son, Edward Norden, and his faithful servant, Walter, at the ready.

They look ready for war.

Leohardt smiled amicably. "Oh, please. We should be thanking you for your diligent efforts."

I gave him a regal nod. "As per my letter, I'd like to leave these people in your care," I said loudly enough that the prisoners could hear. "They have had *loyalty issues* as of late, so I would ask that you oversee their reeducation. Seeing them rot in prison would be a shame, so spare them no hardship."

"But of course, my prince!"

For the first time, the traitors relaxed slightly, and I spied a glimmer of hope in their eyes. They attempted to kill Leohardt, but they failed spectacularly, and we agreed that there was use to be gleaned from them yet. Returning them to Orion wasn't an option, as that would have both been laborious and alerted House Vilienne to our movements. Now that their sense of duty and their enchantments had been shattered, they showed no signs of resisting further. Playing along with us could only benefit them.

Lord Zachary ordered Walter to remove the prisoner's bonds. One by one, he reassured them and cut their ties.

"You must've been terrified," I overheard him say. "You only sought to serve your king. I know how horrible you must feel now."

Sure enough, his words revitalized them as they massaged their wrists and stretched. A few of them were smirking. They believed they had some degree of political immunity here as well, and while it was true I couldn't punish them directly, there were plenty of other ways for me to make them miserable should the need arise.

Walter stood before them to address the group, clearing his throat as a pastor might before a sermon. "Inept as I may be, I shall relieve you of your sorrows and your frustrations, your shock upon hearing the truth, and your regrets alike."

"I am here for you as well." Lord Zachary nodded. "I would like you to know how a noble may consider your actions."

"Let us consider how to be better servants for our masters!" Edward urged them. "I'll learn alongside you!"

I had a hard time describing the odd impression I gleaned from the triad, but the traitors seemed oblivious to it.

"See that man?" I whispered to Leohardt and gestured in Walter's direction. "He once was ensnared in a trap while trying to save his lord. He still feels miserable about the whole affair."

Leohardt nodded interestedly. "I see."

Walter had stolen a piece of manacite for Lord Zachary's sake, and he'd gone unpunished in the end—if anything, Lord Zachary seemed more upset with himself and his own failings.

House Norden has an...interesting relationship with its servants.

On the other hand, Edward had made a fool of himself during the *Star Maiden* incident and seemed even more blockheaded than ever. Maybe the Nordens' simple-minded reputation was actively corroding their wits. There was one thing I knew with absolute certainty:

"They might actually reeducate them in a month," Leohardt remarked, impressed.

Murmurs ran throughout the group of turncoats.

"And here I thought I'd die for sure when they told me their plan..."

"This is for Orion's sake, too, huh?"

Walter nodded. "I'm grateful you were stopped before you committed any serious crimes."

Even Lord Zachary reassured them as best he could.

“Quite the good fortune indeed!”

Repetition had quite an effect on an individual. Even if one didn’t believe it, repeating something over and over could change one’s mind—and there wasn’t a trio more bullheadedly determined than the Nordens in the whole kingdom.

“Well then, I’ll leave you to it,” I said.

“By all means! Thank you again for visiting my humble estate, Your Royal Highness!”

I glanced back at the doorway to find the turncoats already pleading their cases to Walter. The next time I saw them, their begging would be replaced with the shine of obedience.

I suppose nothing lasts forever, does it?

With that, we left the Norden Mansion.



“**BEFORE** we go any further, I need to confirm something.” We were still in the carriage heading home.

“Oh?” Leohardt raised an eyebrow and crossed his legs. “Go on.”

“You want to dispose of House Vilienne, make Prince Malius king, and have Lady Lecia be his queen, correct?”

“Of course...though I suppose after this little altercation, I don’t feel nearly as bad about House Vilienne. We can focus on the other two for now.”

For that to happen, we’d have to borrow *Star Maiden*’s power.

“Does Prince Malius like that book that much?” I asked.

“It’s all he reads, day in and day out. Why, I’d become a writer in a heartbeat if I could ensnare him like that.”

That’s one rival I can’t imagine Lady Serena anticipating.

“Of course, he’s always loved stories,” he continued. “That only made it more titillating when he ran into Lecia and *Star Maiden* in such rapid succession.”

Prince Malius loved the book, then—and *Star Maiden* had become quite popular in Orion as a whole, according to Harold. If Lady Lecia were antagonized by Leohardt’s bride-to-be, she would naturally earn the love of people across the land. Not only that, but she also had the same honest decency that the heroine was supposed to have. If Prince Malius were to condemn a so-called

villainess under such circumstances, the public would side with him in a heartbeat, and all attempts to put Leohardt on the throne would be quashed.

“Even my sweet, sweet brother couldn’t sit back and watch his darling Lecia suffer such abuse.”

“But how can you expect Elizabeth to bully anyone? She’s an angel,” I declared.

“Don’t worry. I’ll gladly abuse Lecia in her stead.”

“You’re terrifying. You know that, don’t you?”

Judging from the look in his eyes, he was serious. I didn’t doubt for an instant that he would lay down his life for Prince Malius.

“You’re quite impressive yourself,” Leohardt smirked. “You seemed to have my entire plan figured out from the start. You’ve quite the head on your shoulders.”

“I suppose so.”

I couldn’t bring myself to tell him he wasn’t the first to try to bring the *Star Maiden* novel to life. I cleared my throat and changed the topic.

“At any rate, I can’t let Elizabeth be a party to your schemes,” I told him firmly.

She couldn’t, even if she wanted to. Her acting was too miserable to be of any use to anyone.

“Does that mean she can be a party to *yours*, then?” He chuckled. I didn’t want to admit he’d hit the nail on the head.

“What choice do I have?” I pouted. “Your sparks of insurrection are already threatening to become an inferno.” I’d have to let someone else trigger Prince Malius’ change of heart. “I suppose I’ll have to use my trump card,” I muttered sullenly.

It wasn’t an easy decision to make. The thought of having that purple-haired lecher take on an important role left more than a little uncertainty in my heart.



EVEN after escorting Lady Lecia to her room, she only stared in disbelief. She was gracious and deferent to even the servants and ladies-in-waiting, so I was afraid she might freeze, but I had little recourse.

Prince Vincent tasked me with making her a proper lady, and after receiving not only Mother and Father's but also Prince Leohardt's permission, I brought her to the la Montlivere Mansion. She was to stay in the most opulent guest room we had, reserved for only the noblest of visitors.

Lady Lecia gave me a look of pure horror, but I smiled reassuringly at her.

"Um... I realize it may be a tad difficult, but please try to relax."

"B-B-But Lady Elizabeth! I-I can't... This r-room is...!"

"This is our finest guest room, yes—and if you intend to be the crown prince's fiancée, you'd best grow accustomed to such luxuries."

In an instant, she went from pale to bright red. "F-Fiancée?!"

The mere mention of her beloved was enough to stir fond memories of their time together. Every word only reaffirmed her love for him, much like I felt for Prince Vincent. That was why I was so determined to help her. I also believed that studying abroad would deepen her understanding of foreign nations and make her a better queen, but I wanted to see her love come to fruition first and foremost.

I nodded. "Yes, his fiancée. I'm sure you were staying in a room befitting a fledgling baroness in the palace—but here, all the servants have been instructed to treat you as a crown prince's betrothed. In effect, we're social equals now."

"B-But I couldn't possibly! I can't even imagine that."

She seemed ready to collapse, but I caught her by the arm and rubbed her back reassuringly. I reacted much the same way as a child when I heard I was to marry Prince Vincent. I knew how to carry myself as a duke's daughter or a nobleman's wife, but I had no idea how a future queen was supposed to carry herself. I could only imagine how lost Lady Lecia felt. Therein lay the importance of this exercise—she had to understand on a fundamental level what that title meant without losing herself in the revelry. She seemed confident enough in her studies, but one couldn't become queen with books alone.

"Try to withstand it, for Prince Malius' sake. You can't possibly meet him in Orion's palace halls if you're quivering like that."

"I-I guess not..."

"No, you cannot," I said firmly. "You'll need to fundamentally

relearn your manners as well. Everything from how you greet people to where and how you take your seat at a table changes as of now. A future queen's life is a whole new world."

Her gaze wandered for a moment before finally meeting my eyes. I smiled as reassuringly as I could. From what I'd heard, Prince Malius' accession rested squarely on her shoulders. Prince Leohardt was a wicked soul to force such pressure on a young lady, but the situation demanded far more than that from her. I had to know if she possessed the resolve to lead her country.

"Don't worry. All the tutors who trained me are still employed here at the la Montlivere Mansion. We have plenty of pâtissiers ready to make sweets for you, too."

Lady Lecia's eyes lit up eagerly. "Sweets?"

"Yes. Let me tell you, nothing heals a weary soul better than sugar. If not for sugar, I would never have made it through my lessons."

There were three sources from which my resolve stemmed: love, sugar, and my friends. Fortunately, I could provide her with the latter two.

"I promise I will support you with every resource at my disposal. Are you willing to trust me?"

"L-Lady Elizabeth..."

"Yes, Lady Lecia?"

She extended a gloved hand towards me, and I gripped it comfortingly. With that, Lady Lecia raised her head and stood. Her expression was firm with resolve, and she had somehow found her strength. She must have remembered something to aid her.

Good. I was afraid she'd noticed Lord Lars for a moment.

I'd asked him to stay out of sight for fear that he might startle her. Even now, he peered out from behind a nearby pillar, a piteous whine on his lips. It pained me to treat him so coldly, but I shook my head and urged him back into the shadows. I swore I could still feel him watching me, though.

After a long moment, Lady Lecia nodded, her resolve affirmed. She looked back at me with unwavering eyes and smiled charmingly.

"Thank you so much. I've never been anything more than a lowly baron's third daughter, and I've never been very good with manners. Prince Malius says he doesn't mind me the way I am, but I want to be able to stand on my own two feet." She blushed as she

continued, “And, um, I’d like to try your sweets.”

“That’s the spirit!”

I squeezed her hands with glee.



She had already attended several of my study salons, and everyone knew how diligent she was with her studies. I easily understood Prince Malius' love for her. I would've hated to have to compete with her for another's affection.

"Well, then," I continued. "Let's see your new room, shall we?"

The servants by the door moved to open it for her.

"Oh! Um... I-I'm sorry! I can't do this!!"

With that, she sprinted down the corridor.

"Proper ladies don't run!" I called after her, but she was already too distant to hear me.

Oddly enough, I believe I understand her now. She must be every bit as earnest as Lady Yulisse.

I was thinking of the former daughter of House Merrifield, a young woman who had been disowned by her own parents and was generously taken in by House Marshal.

Come to think of it, I heard she was learning manners as well. I hope she's been well...



AT that moment, a different scene was unfolding at the Marshal Mansion.

"Ah... ACHOOOO!"

Yulisse let out a mighty sneeze, nearly doubling over forward in the process.

"Oh, my," Raphael chuckled. "Is that a cold I hear?"

Her eyes flew open, and she whipped around to face the doorway he was standing in.

"L-Lord Raphael?! Th-These are the servants' quarters!"

"Of course. And since I'm your master, there shouldn't be any problem with that, should there?"

There were problems—too many to count. Her room was cramped and plain, with no way of entertaining a marquis' son. It was no place for him, and even if one were to overlook that, no man should waltz into a lady's room unannounced.

"Oh, come now," he said with a sly smile. "You've invited me to your room in the past, haven't you?"

Yulisse yelped and scrambled away from him.

He didn't just read my mind, did he? That's horrifying! C-Can

magic really do that?!

She *had* technically done so once, but she was under orders. She had to follow the plot, and he knew it.

“...Huh?”

Yulisse braced herself in preparation for whatever he might attempt, but he didn’t move a muscle. He’d never tried to force himself on her, not once. He loved salacious subtexts and innuendos, but that alone was enough to instill a healthy fear of the man in her. He was a true sadist, no doubt about it.

As she braced herself in case this visit would be different, he narrowed his eyes charmingly and laughed.

“I knew it. You’re more attractive than that exchange student.”

“Exchange...what?”

“I’m sorry for the intrusion, my dear. Good night. I’ll be out of the mansion during the next few days off, so feel free to relax.”

Content, he turned and left the room. She could only watch him leave, confused and unable to even curtsy as manners dictated. She was a criminal, a wretched excuse for a lady who attempted to ensnare a duke’s daughter and the kingdom’s crown prince—and yet Raphael seemed determined to have her as his wife.

He can’t be serious.

He could be purposefully getting her hopes up only so he could disappoint her later. Heart fluttering back and forth between pain and elation, she sighed.

Raphael’s only real mistake was failing to account for how completely he’d demolished her trust in him.



THAT weekend, I received a letter from Prince Vincent, asking me to bring Lady Lecia to the palace. We had been seeing significantly more of each other ever since the *Star Maiden* incident ended last year, to the point where I felt genuinely blessed.

I mustn’t dream of seeing him or talking with him more than I already do. Absolutely not. Just because he was considerate enough to call us lovers doesn’t mean I should overstep my bounds.

Lady Lecia gave me a worried look. “Lady Elizabeth? Are you all right?”

“Yes. You’ve nothing to worry about.”

I quickly forgot my glee and straightened my posture.

As soon as we arrived at the palace, we were directed into the gardens. All manner of topiary shaped to the queen's designs surrounded us, from bowing chameleons to hand-standing rabbits. Lord Lars flew loops in the air, perplexed by the gargantuan animals, and I couldn't help but chuckle at him. Even Lady Lecia recognized and appreciated Her Majesty's designs.

"There's this store in town, you see," I began. "They have all manner of charming goods like this there."

"Really?! I'd love to see it!"

"If we're permitted, I'd gladly accompany you."

Even if we were denied our outing, I knew how to contact a merchant who dealt in the wares. That was how I acquired the aqua-blue statuette of Count Mash Mallows in my room.

"I can't wait!"

"Indeed."

I couldn't help but smile at the sight of her excitement.

Shortly afterward, we arrived where we were supposed to meet Prince Vincent and Prince Leohardt.

"Sorry for making you come all the way here!" a voice came from above us.

Looking up, the princes waved to us from the third-story balcony. I curtsied and waved back, while Lady Lecia likewise hailed them. Prince Vincent had a somewhat strained smile on his face.

I'll have to remind him to learn proper long-distance greetings. Still, I wonder what he could have called us here for?

Then, before my very eyes, the unthinkable happened. Prince Leohardt leaned a tad too far over the balcony railing.

"Whaaa?!"

He let out a startled cry before toppling headfirst into the open air.

"Prince Leohardt?!" Lady Lecia and I cried out.

Without a second thought, I kicked off my heels and ran toward him.

"Quergh!" Lord Lars squealed as he swooped toward the falling prince. He grabbed his clothes and attempted to slow his fall, but he was too small to slow his descent and instead fell alongside Prince Leohardt.

I used every last shred of my strength to propel myself forward

and toward the endangered royal. I couldn't afford to stop his fall with my life, but my dress had enough fabric that I stood a chance at cushioning his impact.

I hope I make it!

I extended my hand, but I came up short. His hair billowed against the wind, barely beyond my fingertips.

No!

"P-Prince Leohardt!"

At that moment, a brilliant light flashed from behind me. It was as if a second sun had suddenly descended, and I didn't dare turn around to find its source.

"Gravito Windia!" a familiar voice came from above, and in concert, a powerful gust of wind knocked the prince back into the air. It was the same spell Prince Vincent used to save me in the past.

Prince Leohardt struggled to right himself before alighting on the lawn, unharmed. His face bore none of the fear I would've expected from a near-death experience.

What is happening? I wondered as I tried to keep my skirts from blowing astray.

"E-Elizabeth!" cried Prince Vincent. "I'm sorry!"

"I'm fine, Your Royal Highness. I've got a more pressing concern at the moment."

I turned around to find Lady Lecia sitting splayed on the ground. Countless beams of light still danced about her, and even I could tell the situation was bizarre.

She looked around herself in a daze. "Wh-What happened?"

"Lady Lecia..."

Prince Leohardt strode towards her. He seemed composed, and a glance at the third story told me that Prince Vincent was likewise unsurprised.

"Lecia," the Orion prince said, "you've got an incredible talent for magic. From now on, you're a saint."

"...A what?" she squeaked.

That was all she said—the poor girl had fainted, her eyes stuck wide open in shock.



FROM before he could even remember, Malius had been barraged

by expectations. He had been called “Crown Prince this” and “Your Royal Highness that” by everyone he knew, to the point where he all but forgot his true name. The only exceptions were his parents and his brother, a boy four years his junior.

That was why his encounter with Lecia was so memorable.

She was a mere baron’s daughter and his youngest child at that. She had never even seen Malius’ face before. The way she asked his name was so blunt and refreshing that he forgot his alias and spoke the truth. Perhaps his attraction to her began at that very moment.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lord Malius! My name is Lecia Valoire.”

Her flowing raven-black hair and earnest smile betrayed no unease. Just like that, he was in love. It was so simple that it baffled him. *This is no better than that novel*, he berated himself, but his pulse refused to slow.

In said novel—*Even the Stars Cry for the Holy Maiden*—the conceited-yet-socially-awkward prince encountered the heroine, discovered true love, and strove to improve his many imperfections. In the process, he shook off the stale noble customs that bound him, and the whole aristocracy entered a new age.

Malius never grew conceited with his title, but he was awkward in spades. He couldn’t even stand in front of a crowd—a farce of a prince if there ever was one. The countless expectations his caregivers had placed on him were like shackles. He had to be perfect. Even the slightest imperfection was blasphemous to his name, and the simplest of tasks bore horrible weight. What, then, was the point of doing anything?

Duke Vilienne insisted that he was on Malius’ side. He reminded Malius over and over that the throne was rightfully his as the crown prince while watching him with snake-like eyes. He insisted his meddling was for Malius’ sake. Every new “favor” was a shackle on the prince’s delicate heart.

As his worries about the future grew, Malius felt increasingly ashamed, and his blush served as his only means of resistance. He learned to bottle his feelings inside, but that gave him a reputation as a callous and heartless man. No matter how hard he tried to appear normal, the sight of his brother Leohardt and Crown Prince Vincent of the neighboring kingdom weighed heavily on his heart. They were perfect princes and never had to exert themselves to be

so. He was the only failure.

Only when he looked into Lecia's obsidian eyes did his fears abate. He never felt ill around her, though his pulse quickened. That was the only time his shyness didn't feel unpleasant. Lecia blushed all the time, and he knew they were of one heart.

"Lord Malius, I couldn't help but notice you have the same name as the crown prince. Why, it's like you fell out of a fairy tale. Sometimes, I wonder if you're royalty..."

At that point, she finally pieced it together. She looked him over carefully, head to toe. He smiled bashfully, and with that, she paled and took a knee.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry, Your Royal Highness! Please forgive my rudeness! I'll accept whatever punishment you deem fit, but please spare my family! They've been working so hard in their lands, a-and the first pumpkin harvest finished just the other—"

Malius burst out laughing, unable to restrain himself. She was earnest. She knew who he was, but exploiting him for her own ends didn't cross her mind. It felt heavenly.

"Relax," he finally replied. "I'm not a fan of formalities, and I don't deserve your respect."

He spoke in the same princely tone he'd been raised to speak in, quickly abandoning his fake accent. He'd never been able to speak that way in public before, and Lecia was the last person he wanted to be formal with, but she paid it no mind. Instead, she let out a sigh of relief.

"You're very kind, my prince."

"Me? K-Kind?"

"Of course! Only a kind man would forgive me so easily, right?"

Again, she seemed earnest—if anything, she seemed puzzled that it was so hard for him to accept her words. His blush returned to his cheeks.

He now knew how fairy tale princes felt. *Their love must have been the same*, he thought as he let himself drown in her eyes.

Malius and Lecia continued to meet in secret. It should've been difficult for a couple from such different worlds to see each other, but Leohardt created opportunity after opportunity for them. He was a better brother than Malius could ever ask for, and he supported the shut-in at every turn. Somehow, Leohardt knew about Lecia before Malius even came to him for help, and he

affirmed their relationship. He even agreed that Lecia was a better fit for him than the duke's daughter, who had inexplicably cut off their engagement. Malius felt blessed beyond description.

Lecia was overjoyed to hear about Leohardt, and she responded by telling Malius about her own family. Though they were the lowest rank of nobility, they took the rulership of their realm seriously. Her father was well-loved by the common folk. Her mother was always a ray of light in the mansion. Aside from them, she had three brothers and two sisters.

"I'm the youngest child, and ashamed as I am to admit it, I've always preferred gardening and picking fruit in the woods to studying," she'd confessed to him. "My parents always chided me for it, but they were never too insistent, and I'm afraid my manners aren't as polished as they should be..."

"But you have heart, and that's more important. All the manners in the world couldn't make you more beautiful than you already are."

"Oh? I could say the same about you! You're quite pure-hearted, yourself."

He protested, but Lecia refused to hear a word of it. Finally, he swallowed his unease and thanked her instead. She always smelled of the earth, and one whiff put him at ease. He wanted nothing more than to be worthy of her love.

Lecia was also a fan of *Star Maiden*. The two never went so far as to relate their relationship to the characters', but reading it always filled him with a sense of longing.

"Stories, at least, deserve a happily ever after," she once said with a smile.

He couldn't tell her to keep having faith.

Every time he flipped through the novel's pages, he knew the same happy ending was waiting. He became obsessed with it. He wanted nothing more than to mature, just like the prince in the story had, and rush to his beloved's side. The moment when he would finally confess his feelings for her occupied his every waking thought.



MALIUS took his first steps towards polite society. He managed to

exchange small talk with several nobles, though simply saying their names and greeting them was surprisingly tiresome. Believing that Lecia would persevere if she were in his shoes, he forged onward. Whenever he felt ready to give up, he recalled her smile, and that filled him with warmth.

Reality was crueler than fiction. He struggled with his reflexive blushing and was no more confident than before. His determination to become a worthy husband to Lecia quickly turned to self-loathing. Every day, more people called for Leohardt to become king instead. He didn't hate them for their words; rather, he agreed with them, and that only depressed him further. If he could relinquish his title as crown prince and become one of Leohardt's ministers, it would be possible to wed Lecia. The idea upset Leohardt, but Malius was determined to have it no other way. He was a miserable human being, and he deserved nothing better.

That was shattered the day Leohardt abruptly left to go abroad. Worse yet was the last passage in his brother's farewell letter.

"You're bound to be a wonderful king, Prince Malius. I'll train to become worthy of your affection."

That final, heart-shattering passage was in none other than Lecia's own hand.

Chapter 4: Training Begins

THE worst finally came to pass. I wish I had any other recourse, but alas.

While I hated being manipulated, especially by Leohardt, Orion was one of our nation's closest allies, and I couldn't abandon them on the eve of revolution. Lady Lecia would be the key to preventing conflict; Raphael mentioned she had a wealth of quality mana, and such a resource was rare even among the nobility. It was only a matter of honing her skills. That was why Leohardt jumped off the balcony, leading to this present nightmare.

"It's a delight to finally meet you! My name is Raphael, son of Marquis Marshal. Prince Vincent has told me so much about you, and might I say you're even more charming than he described?"

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well, Lord Raphael. I've heard much about you. Please, call me Elizabeth."

I rolled my eyes as Raphael's saccharine introduction prompted a faint blush from Elizabeth. I had feared their meeting for years, but I should have known there wouldn't be any significant issues straight away. Raphael was maintaining his polite façade, and Elizabeth had already fallen for me, as odd as it was to admit it. Nonetheless, she was a pure-hearted young maiden, and he was a two-faced womanizer. I didn't like that combination at all, even if I knew Raphael would behave. I could accept him as a friend and as an aide, but I wanted him to give the love of my life a wide berth. That made enough sense, I believed.

"His Royal Highness has appointed me as Lady Lecia's magic tutor. With any luck, we may be seeing more of each other."

"I suppose so. I know she'll be safe in your competent hands."

"Leave everything to me. I may be young, but I pour my heart and soul into my work."

Even as I mulled over the predicament, Raphael and Elizabeth seemed to be getting along perfectly.

I almost wish Raphael would say something untoward and rid me of this suspense...

With the formalities out of the way, Raphael turned back to Leohardt and Lady Lecia. He looked her over a little too intently from head to toe while she regarded him with blatant caution. Finally, he grinned and nodded.

"I must admit I'm impressed. You've got your mana circulating already. Normally, it takes months of meditation to achieve such results. Might I ask what your secret is?"

"I jumped off a balcony," Leohardt replied in her place.

"Ah, I see. So the shock of witnessing the fall was enough to forcibly manifest her mana, then."

How did he come to that conclusion so quickly? There's insightful, and then there's whatever he just did. Perhaps those two are more alike than I feared.

"Thank you for assisting us," Leohardt said.

"Please don't thank me. I consider it a privilege and a blessing to be of use to you."

Lecia hesitantly raised her hand. "Um... Excuse me? I'm not sure I follow..."

Raphael beamed at her. "Relax, darling. You're already at the point where you only need an incantation to cast magic."

I wasn't surprised—most nobles didn't know the first thing about magic when they started at the Academy. Magicology wasn't touched upon before the second year when students were required to take theory and practice courses. Even then, the majority only learned the most basic of spells, mainly creating small gusts of wind and snuffing out candles. It wouldn't do to teach offensive magic and risk someone getting hurt.

From there, the lucky few students who demonstrated a talent for magic were allowed to take special classes in their third year to hone their skills. I was a special case; it wouldn't do for the crown prince to be turned away for having insufficient mana proficiency, so I had received special one-on-one classes from Lord Dominic since I was a child.

But once in a while, a student with a proper aptitude for magic came along. He or she would often get a feel for the mana flowing through their veins instinctually, whereas most students took many months to reach that point. Many of those special cases also had a solid grasp of the next step—drawing mana from one's environment. Lady Lecia had not yet demonstrated that second ability, but I didn't doubt her talents.

“You’ve a wealth of natural mana,” Raphael said with an appraising look, “but I would assume you’ve gotten quite familiar with nature as well.”

“Well, yes, actually. I spent a lot of time outdoors as a child.”

“They say that pure mana takes hold in healthy bodies with ease. Father often took me into the woods to meditate when I was younger.”

I doubt anything pure would take an interest in you, I nearly said, but I restrained myself. I didn’t want to cause a scene in front of Elizabeth. I shot Harold a prodding look, hoping he would mock Raphael in my stead, but he subtly shook his head no.

Oh, come now. You know exactly what I’m thinking.

Lecia looked down at her hands in disbelief. “You mean... I can really use magic?”

“Of course. And I, Raphael, swear I’ll mold you into the sweetest little witch the world has ever seen!”

“W-Witch?!”

“Oh, my apologies. I meant ‘mage.’ I must admit, though, that there’s something delightfully spicy about witches—er. Please forget I said anything.” He cleared his throat, and the playful tone disappeared from his voice. “Are you prepared, Lady Lecia?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Good. Over the next six months, I intend to have you master two different types of advanced magic.”

“Okay.” She nodded, but as soon as the meaning of his words sank in, she froze. “Wait, what?!”

That was an impressive double-take.

“I’ll be teaching you a charm to ward off evil as well as a blessing to purify evil. Those two spells are virtually identical across the continent, so there won’t be any issue with you learning them here.”

Leohardt nodded. “Exactly. For the other advanced spells, the paperwork is too much of a hassle to bother.”

Even if we were on good terms with Orion, Lady Lecia was still a foreigner. Becoming an officially licensed mage was unusual in and of itself. It would be beyond foolish to reveal our best-kept magical secrets to her so easily.

Fortunately, Lady Lecia understood. She bowed her head. “Thank you very much!”

Well, I suppose her heart’s in the right place, but her bowing

technique needs a lot of work.

Lady Lecia wouldn't be the only one undergoing special training. I turned to Elizabeth. She looked up at me and smiled.

Oh, she's so precious! Er, no. Business first.

"I'll be teaching you magic, too," Raphael told her, cutting me off before I could open my mouth.

She blinked at him in surprise. "Me? What kind of magic?"

"In your case, it doesn't matter what. Your objective will be to stabilize your mana reserves, allowing you to control Lars far more easily. He seems attached to you enough that he won't go berserk, but his...attitude, shall we say, needs a little work."

Lars narrowed his eyes at him, let out a diminutive roar, and flapped his wings in irritation. He clearly didn't like being talked down to. His memories may have been erased, but he was just as arrogant as ever.

Raphael paid him no mind. "If you strengthen your mana, you'll even be able to strengthen Lars should the need arise—say, if you're attacked by bandits."

"I can strengthen him...?" Her amethyst eyes lit up with anticipation. "Does that mean I can protect Prince Vincent as well?!"

Lars, who had been flitting about Raphael's head angrily moments before, recoiled in horror so violently that he crashed into the floor.

"I shall do whatever it takes!" Elizabeth announced, dipping low in a curtsy. "Please teach me all I need to know, Lord Raphael!"

Raphael put a hand to his breast and bowed deeply. "With pleasure."

"Did you hear that, Lord Lars? We'll be protecting His Royal Highness together!"

Lars' eyes had an unpleasant glint, but I didn't see what he was so upset about.

You specifically reincarnated yourself as a fellwyrn and bound yourself to Elizabeth. What did you think would happen?

I stifled a laugh. That poor, poor fool.



LARS' tantrums aside, Lady Lecia and Elizabeth got right to their

studies. As it was the first day of their tutelage, it would only be a short two-hour session. Raphael would assign them homework to complete during the week, and on the following weekend, he would assess the fruits of their labor and proceed to the next topic.

Lady Lecia's first task was to recall how her earlier surge of mana felt so she could replicate it at will. She would sit with her eyes closed in concentration, occasionally letting out a curt cry before releasing the same mesmerizing rays of light she had earlier. It was quite the odd sight. Lars' eyes would flash blue whenever she did so. It seemed he was frightened by the display, which was fair. Humans weren't supposed to glow, after all.

At Lady Lecia's side, Elizabeth stared intently into a piece of manacite. Her lessons began with the manipulation of mana. She had never struggled with her concentration, and I figured she would excel at it.

Instead, however, she let out a heavy sigh. "Oh, why won't it react?"

Every living being had mana. The manacite was supposed to act as a catalyst for her magic. Should she release even the faintest amount of mana, it should light up with ease. It was a common way of teaching beginners since it provided instant feedback on any progress. In her hands, the manacite seemed as inert as any ordinary stone.

"It's always hard in the beginning," I reassured her. "This was how I learned to draw out my mana, but it took me three full days to receive any reaction at all."

Raphael nodded. "You're free to borrow that manacite, of course. I encourage you to meditate on it whenever you have free time."

"All right, I shall. Thank you most kindly."

With that, she went back to glaring at the ore.

She's so adorable when she concentrates.

Come to think of it, I'd never seen Elizabeth try so hard before. Everyone knew she put a great deal of effort into everything she did, but only her tutors had seen her in the act. She was always elegant and refined, and such effort didn't befit a lady. Personally, I was elated that I could see a new side of her—perhaps I'd see more, should I be lucky. I pretended to gaze out the window to avoid distracting her, only occasionally glancing back at her practice. Harold rolled his eyes at me, but I paid him no mind.

Raphael watched the pair practice in silence for some time before suddenly stopping Elizabeth. "If I might be so bold, milady, you seem distracted. Is something bothering you?"

"What? Um... How could you tell?"

He smirked knowingly. "If you find yourself thinking of a certain someone during your meditation, might I suggest you imagine their face on the surface of the manacite?"

"A-All right, I can try."

She didn't pay any mind to the assumption she was thinking of a person. I averted my gaze and controlled my breathing, so as to not blush untowardly.

When I turned back to Elizabeth, the consternation had disappeared from her face, replaced by joy. As if teased out by her smile, the manacite in her hands glimmered.

"It lit up! I did it!" she exclaimed. "Oh, thank you, Lord Raphael!"

"My, you two are quite the obsessive— Er, you're quite the studious student, I mean. I'm glad I could be of service."

Oh, come now, I know what you were about to say. We're obsessed with each other, are we? Well, you're right! Joke's on you! I wish I'd been the one to give Elizabeth that advice...

When I was learning magic all those years ago, I resorted to the same tactic. I never expected Elizabeth to do the same.

I should've known as much. When you truly feel for someone, you think of them all the time. It's so easy to get distracted by imagined glimpses of them, especially when one is supposed to be focusing elsewhere. The key to overcoming such distractions isn't to think of something else but to focus on them harder.

I glanced at Elizabeth, only to find that she had stolen a look at me as well. We both averted our eyes in embarrassment, and the manacite in Elizabeth's hands flickered and glowed even brighter.

Well. I don't know how to feel about this.

She wasn't even looking at me, but as the blush on her cheeks grew deeper, the manacite's glow increased. However, I felt ill at ease that other men—Lars in particular—were witnessing such a blessed sight, so I rapidly retreated to the corner of the room where Harold and Lars were waiting.

A few moments later, Raphael joined us, his instructions over for the day. He stopped by my side to study Lars carefully. Leohardt likewise gave up watching Lady Lecia's practice to join us.

“Yep,” Raphael whispered amusedly, “that’s a fellwyrms’ mana all right.”

“How can you tell?” I whispered back.

“Well... It’s black.”

“You’re not looking at his mana at all, are you?”

Leohardt was the only one unfazed by Raphael’s ramblings.

Raphael let out a small sigh. “Still, the legends say he’s supposed to be the size of a house.”

“Maybe that’s because his real body is still sealed away somewhere?”

“Who’s to say? Maybe the summoning was a failure. Maybe he mini-sized himself on purpose to be more popular with the ladies. We may never know.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle, and Lars averted his gaze.

Wait, don’t tell me.

“He couldn’t live in Elizabeth’s mansion if he was that large, could he?” Raphael winked at Lars.

Lars cocked his head to the side in feigned confusion. “Qwrmm?”

Why, that little wretch. He put a lot of thought into this, didn’t he? He had quite the head on his shoulders, even if he was a spoiled twit.

I gave him a firm look. “I won’t hold your transformation against you now, but if you attempt anything untoward on Elizabeth, I’ll take you *straight* to Mother. Do I make myself clear?”

“Gwerr...”

“Here’s a fun fact,” Raphael cut in. “Dragon scales are quite useful in alchemy.” He grinned with enough evil and malice to summon another horror from beyond some accursed seal. “Fellwyrms are extinct, so they’re *especially* valuable. They’re said to have potent hallucinogenic and mind-muddling effects. Why, I can only imagine the fun I could have mixing your scales into a forbidden art or two.”

“Kweergh?!” Lars screeched in horror.

“Shh! Quiet!” I snapped.

“Kwee...”

Lars still seemed disturbed, but after I issued Raphael a similar warning, he folded his wings and relaxed.

Raphael wants to get his hands on a fellwyrms, does he? That sounds like an absolutely horrible idea.

Raphael followed Lars to where he curled up next to the wall,

but Harold stopped him.

“Please refrain from poking him. He may spew fire.”

“Oh? Worried about me, are you?”

“I can’t risk myself or His Royal Highness getting hit by the flames.”

Lars couldn’t breathe fire without Elizabeth’s command, though—that was why Raphael felt so safe bugging the little drake.

Time flew by—and Lars continued to get poked and prodded—until evening arrived, and the ladies stood from their practice. That marked the end of their guided training. For the rest of the week, they’d be working in their rooms. Just as Elizabeth curtsied and was about to excuse herself, I stopped her.

“Do you mind if I have a word with you before you leave for home?”

With that, I escorted her to a secluded place where we might talk alone. There, I explained the details of my plan. It was critical that Lady Lecia hear nothing of it. I was worried that Elizabeth might not agree to my designs, so I was relieved when she nodded readily at the end.

So she likes this sort of thing, does she? I’m learning more about her by the day.



ELIZABETH and Lady Lecia’s magic skills advanced at an astounding pace. Lady Lecia mastered drawing mana from her environment, and Elizabeth could make her manacite glow more brightly and for longer than before.

Raphael sighed. “Oh, I wish I could train my little Yulie like this...”

“Absolutely not.”

Yulisse was one of the culprits behind the *Star Maiden* ordeal, and she had been under house arrest in the Marshal Mansion ever since. She was firmly stuck in his “love nest,” where Raphael no doubt tormented her in every sick, sadistic way his filthy mind could conceive. Should she learn magic, it would be assumed she hadn’t learned her lesson and was attempting to free herself, resulting in an even heavier sentence—not to mention Raphael would become a felon, and House Marshal might cease to exist. Not

even he would take such a risk.

Come to think of it, that's another reason for Lars to take on an inhuman form. He knew if we ever caught him, he'd be charged with even greater crimes.

I cast an irritated glance across the table at Lars, though I still had my chin propped up with my elbow. "You're annoyingly clever."

"Kwee!" Lars swished his tail arrogantly. Over the course of Elizabeth's training, his scales had grown sharper, and it felt like he was slightly larger than when we'd first met.

Oh, I hate how he's "connected" to her.

I sighed. "You'd better do your share of the work."

"Gweheh."

Elizabeth was training not just to control Lars better but also for my plan.

I'd best get to work on my share of the scheme.



I hadn't seen Lady Selena in several months, but she was just as jittery as she'd always been. I'd assumed that she'd gotten used to Harold and me after the time we spent together last year, but between the opulence of the palace and Elizabeth's presence, she seemed ready to faint as soon as she stepped through the door. I couldn't blame her. Given the trouble her novel brought Elizabeth, she had to be horribly self-conscious, even if Elizabeth was more forgiving than a host of angels.

"A-Again, I'm, um, so sorry for last year..." She bowed so deeply it looked like she would snap herself in half at the waist.

Elizabeth placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder and smiled. "Everyone makes mistakes. Besides, we have something important to ask of you."

Precisely.

There was something we needed her to do at all costs—produce a sequel to *Even the Stars Cry Upon the Holy Maiden*. Not only that, we needed it as soon as possible.

"Can you do it?" I asked her.

"O-Of course! I'll do it even if it kills me!"

"Please don't," Elizabeth hurriedly assured her. "Just get it

done as quickly as you can without endangering your health.”

“All right. I-I can do that.”

“And remember,” I added, “you can’t tell a soul we requested a sequel.”

“Don’t worry! I’ll keep your secret if it kills me!”

...I won’t even grace that with a response.

After that, I made sure the synopsis was the same as when last I heard it—the villainess revives a fellwyrn and attacks the neighboring country, only for the heroine with her awakened star-blessed powers and the crown prince to show her the door. Unlike the more grounded academic romance of the first volume, it was decidedly in the realm of fantasy, meaning none of our classmates would expect anything of Elizabeth. Not that there was any need to worry about that; *Star Maiden* had become taboo after the events of the Coming-of-Age Ball, and its proponents in House Drewleid were never mentioned. The novel’s raving fans were forced to indulge in their hobbies off-campus.

“I have one last request. We’d appreciate it if you described the fellwyrn in your novel like this.” I handed her a piece of parchment with our specifications.

“Oh, of course!”

The paper had a drawing of the fellwyrn, with detailed descriptions of its every quality. We couldn’t show her Lars directly, so I had to make a cheat sheet. I drew him rather well, I thought.

Lady Selena seemed confused by our requests, but she didn’t voice her concerns. She wanted to keep her identity as *Star Maiden*’s author a secret after all.

After another round of encouragement from Elizabeth, Lady Selena thanked us profusely and left for home, promising to send word as soon as the outline was complete. As she was leaving, she tripped over her skirt with a high-pitched squeal before collecting herself enough to start on her way once more.

Take care of yourself. I’m honestly worried.

With that, the formalities were out of the way, and Elizabeth was brought fully up to speed. It turned out to be a little overstimulating for Lady Selena, just as I’d feared, but that seemed to encourage her further, so I wasn’t about to question it.

Right, now what? I-I suppose we’re an official couple. I could invite her on a date...couldn’t I?

I glanced at Elizabeth, only to find she was staring at me

intently.

“Wh-What? Is everything all right?” I asked.

“Well... Th-The letter you sent to me said to come alone. Correct?”

I couldn’t recall the last time she tripped over her words so much. That was what I’d written—I didn’t want Lady Lecia to know too much about the plan before it was time, so I asked Elizabeth to make up an excuse and hurry to the palace alone.

Elizabeth averted her gaze, her cheeks reddening faintly. While I was puzzling out what was bothering her, she suddenly looked up at me, and her rose-petal lips parted.

“I-I told Lady Lecia we were...um...g-going on a date. But I don’t want to lie to her...”

“Are you an actual saint?”

“Hm? What did you just say?”

I hurriedly cleared my throat. “Er, nothing. I said nothing at all.”

I understood her not wanting to lie to Lady Lecia, but there were any number of excuses she could’ve made. For her to pick that one, she had to have something in mind. As indirect as it was, *she* was inviting *me* out.

“If I remember correctly, the lotuses in the garden should be in bloom. How about we have some sweets made, and we can view them together?” I invited.

“Let’s.”

She took my hand with a smile, and we left for the palace gardens.



NEITHER of us could stay calm throughout the walk. After wandering and enjoying the early summer air, we found a table set for us under the shade of a large tree. There were already a multitude of sweets and a pot of tea set out. For some reason, the entire kitchen seemed enthralled by Elizabeth, despite hardly any of them ever meeting her. They were every bit as excited for our date as we were, as the sweets were particularly well-crafted. The palace’s pâtissier had prepared a full assortment of cakes, tarts, madeleines, and macarons for us.

At the risk of changing the topic, Elizabeth was radiant. In the years that I'd known her, I noted on many occasions how beautiful she was, or how noble and refined, and I assumed I'd seen her at her best. The revelation that we were now lovers shattered every inhibition I had fostered over the many years of my one-sided love for her.

Elizabeth scooped up a spoonful of the cream-laden crepe. It was feather-soft and smelled heavenly, and the translucent skin easily broke without a knife. She giddily brought it to her lips, and after pausing to appreciate the delicate waves in the filling, she put it in her mouth. Her eyes fluttered shut, her cheeks reddening softly as she smiled. It was as though she'd tasted paradise.

I let out a content sigh. "Oh, how lovely," I muttered.

Elizabeth started. She quickly put down her spoon and sat tall, her cheeks red with blush not derived from her sweets. Until now, she would've made a trite comment about how she thought the desserts were lovely as well. The thought made the moment even more wonderful.

"I think *you're* lovely, Liza" I clarified.

The way my remark blindsided her was so endearing. I didn't know she could be so expressive, and that she was so flustered over me filled my heart with an odd sort of warmth.

Ah, what bliss!

She balled her fists on her lap, a coquettish smile on her lips. She returned my gaze. "I-I think you're quite lovely yourself, Prince Vince."

That was the last thing I expected. The sheer shock prompted me to lose my balance. I toppled backward off my chair, and the back of my head smacked the ground hard.

"P-Prince Vince?!"

Elizabeth cried out for help, but my servants were nowhere to be seen—rather, I imagined one particular servant of mine was rolling his eyes and sighing.

As I rubbed the bump on my head, one thing was clear: Elizabeth may have lost her impenetrable armor of airheadedness, but in its stead, she gained a weapon that could bring me to my knees in a heartbeat.



“FILITE Rainia.”

Elizabeth put a hand on the pitcher as she carefully intoned the incantation. Water formed a steady stream on the inside of the glass, swirling about until the jug was full. Until now, she had practiced on pitchers that were already half-full, but with this, she could finally create water out of thin air—and in less than a month from the start of her studies, no less.

“You’ve been making astounding progress, Elizabeth.”

She looked up at me and smiled. “Only because you’ve been lending me your aid, Prince Vincent.”

She meant it, too—she had only been able to focus so diligently on her spellcraft because she’d been visualizing me.

So this is what requited love feels like!

“I suppose this is to be expected, but I no longer blush at the sight of you.”

She had been maintaining her composure better.

I was like that once myself.

I smiled casually at her. “I’m glad I could be of service to you. Nothing could make me happier.”

“Of course. I can’t stay behind Lady Lecia forever!” Elizabeth shot a sidelong glance at the noblewoman in question, who was facing off against Raphael some distance away.

We were in a small courtyard, between two wings of the palace. It felt nice to train in the open air and the fresh summer breeze. Not even the brilliant sunlight streaming down from above could affect Raphael’s devilish nature, however.

He chuckled. “Well then, let’s see how strong you really are.”

“You won’t win this time! Flikker Licht!”

“Flod Rainia!”

Lady Lecia extended her hands, and a wall of translucent mana appeared in front of her. The light it was formed of flickered, as though she were struggling to control it, but it seemed solid. It had little issue keeping the torrent of water Raphael was channeling at bay.

The fundamental theory behind the wall was the same as the spell Mother had used to bind Lars. By concentrating enough raw mana, it was possible to create a physical barrier that resisted magic. It was simple enough conceptually, but it was far more difficult to make a wall out of pure mana than to form one out of a medium like fire or water. That was the primary reason why holy

magic users were so rare.

Lady Lecia truly does have a talent for this, doesn't she?

After a while, her wall crumbled and faded—she must have run out of mana or lost control of the spell. Raphael's torrent crashed into her defenseless body.

"Ahhh!"

Raphael only grinned and wiped a few errant drops from his monocle as Lady Lecia peeled her sopping dress off the ground.

"I must admit, I didn't expect you to put up so little resistance."

She clenched her fist, and motes of light danced in her eyes. "Why, you...! Try that again, I dare you!"



She's completely fallen for Raphael's act. He is acting, isn't he? I'll give him the benefit of the doubt and assume he is.

"You can't best me with mana alone," he scoffed. "Didn't I teach you what to do?"

Er... He's gone far past teaching mode and into boss mode, hasn't he?

Lady Lecia seemed to understand what he was referring to. She closed her eyes, and I caught her whispering Prince Malius' name.

There were several different means of utilizing vast quantities of mana. One could spend a great deal of time stockpiling energy within oneself, use a catalyst such as a piece of manacite, or borrow the necessary mana from another caster or one's surroundings—though the latter method required the most concentration and skill to accomplish.

Lady Lecia glowed again, just as she had when Leohardt fell. Her black hair lit up in every color imaginable, and even her simple dress sparkled as if with dozens of gemstones. She extended her hands once more.

"Flikker Licht."

Another wall of light appeared before her, this time solid and unbroken.

Raphael chuckled. "That's my girl! Now, Flod Rainia!"

He unleashed another powerful surge of water at her. This time, she had no difficulty deflecting his attack—in fact, the wall seemed to absorb his spell. Every new surge of water that hit her wall disappeared.

Ah, so this is a Divine Wall's effect. I've never seen it in person.

Supposedly, it could remove any elemental alignment from mana and absorb it. It was a high-level spell that afforded a near-impregnable defense against magic, but between the massive amount of mana it consumed and its virtual uselessness against physical attacks, it was hardly ever used.

Raphael's grin widened.

"How do you like this, then? Drago Rainia!"

It was the same spell that Elizabeth had been practicing moments before. The only difference was the amount of water produced, but the amount of mana and level of control required from the caster was in an entirely different league.

Raphael snapped his fingers, and after his stream of water

hesitated and compacted for a moment, it surged forward with all the force of a waterfall. Under normal circumstances, she would be swept away in the blink of an eye.

This time, however, she didn't cry out. She redoubled her focus on her Divine Wall.

Then—*SPLOOSH!*

At the last moment, Lady Lecia's control over her spell slipped, and the wall vanished into thin air. The deluge hit her head-on and sent her sprawling.

Raphael smirked down at her. "That's enough for today."

Evidently, she had passed. She let out a sigh of relief. Raphael was unfazed—their clash had left him without so much as a hair out of place.

A royally certified mage, eh? He's stronger than I could ever be.

A sick feeling snapped me out of my thoughts. When I turned, Elizabeth was looking at him with a tinge of blush on her cheeks. Her eyes were full of genuine admiration.

"That was brilliant, Lord Raphael!" she said. "I have a lot of training ahead of me."

"Don't worry, you're making excellent progress," he reassured her. "With some more practice, you'll be able to use advanced spells like me."

She beamed. "Really?! I must try harder, then!"

He's encouraging them both at once. How dare he try to two-time them like that? What an incorrigible playboy.

I gritted my teeth in frustration, but Leohardt didn't notice as he approached us. He extended his handkerchief to Elizabeth, gesturing to her flowing locks of hair.

"My dear Lady Elizabeth, you've gotten wet."

Liar. She's perfectly dry. I should know—I was prepared to step in this whole time if any water came our way.

I didn't say anything at the risk of seeming petty, but it sat poorly with me regardless. Giving a lady your handkerchief was a sign you wanted to see her again. But there was no point trying to curry favor with Elizabeth—not unless he'd genuinely fallen for her. It was frighteningly easy to imagine her melting his twisted, black heart.

"Thank you most kindly, Prince Leohardt." She accepted his handkerchief and wiped her hair with it. "I'll be sure to return it the next time we meet."

There they are, those horrible words—next time.

Unexpectedly, though, Leohardt shook his head and took his kerchief back from her. “No, I couldn’t possibly trouble you so.”

“Oh. I suppose if you insist...”

With that, it seemed like the case was closed.

But why would he do something so generous, then? That’s unlike him.

Something about the whole interaction left me uneasy.

“Grrrr...” Lars growled from beside my feet. He lashed his tail unhappily.

Raphael, noticing our back-and-forth, chuckled at us.

“Your fiancée did well, I trust?” he asked me.

“Of course she did.”

I gestured at the pitcher she’d filled on the table, and Raphael nodded, satisfied. Elizabeth was making good progress in her training. Despite condensing several months of training into so little time, she made every effort to keep pace. I couldn’t imagine anyone else making such splendid time.

I would have loved to throw myself off a third-story balcony if it would’ve hastened things, but unfortunately, the nature of Lars’ growth meant that slow and steady would win the race. He hadn’t grown any larger since last time, but now even his scales lit up red when he was trying to be intimidating, which proved he was absorbing Elizabeth’s mana. The way he stuck out his tongue at me and flickered his scales was infuriating, though.

As it happened, it also seemed that Elizabeth avoided touching Lars whenever possible. I wasn’t surprised, given what a rotten human he’d been.

All men are wolves...er, dragons. Literally.

Of course, I couldn’t make such a claim. He was a fellwyrn either way, though, so I reminded her to exercise due caution. She nodded readily in response to my warning.

That’s one less thing to worry about, at least.



AFTER escorting Elizabeth and Lady Lecia home—and sending Raphael back alone—Leohardt and I returned to the palace, where Harold and a few “friends” awaited us. My faithful manservant was

absent from our training because he was entertaining visitors from House Norden. They had visited to report on the traitors' reeducation.

As I entered the parlor, I discovered that the four reformees weren't bound. They had agreed to join our cause willingly. They prostrated themselves at the sight of me.

"Oh, sweet and merciful prince, thank you for opening our eyes to the foulness of our deeds!"

"We now understand what overshadowed our actions."

"We attempted to act in our land's best interests, but alas, we were blind to the grievous error of our ways!"

"We have only you and His Benevolence Prince Leohardt to thank for our reformation."

The way they tripped over themselves was almost comical, as were their exaggerations of loyalty. House Norden had made splendid progress on their brainwashing in just one month.

Good habits are contagious; similarities attract; choose your friends wisely; all that.

I greeted them with my princely smile. Harold subtly took his place behind me, his face as frosty and unaffected as ever.

Carrot and stick, so to speak.

"Prince Leohardt told me of your change of heart," I announced.

"Oh, Prince Leohardt!" called one. "He saved us from damnation!"

Leohardt put on his best royal smile, readily placing himself in the center of attention. "I must apologize, my dear subjects. My shortcomings cast shadows of doubt on your hearts."

"We're unworthy!"

"What generosity...!"

The former traitors clasped their hands and fervently bowed their heads to him. They must have forgotten how he'd used his devil's smile to pry House Vilienne's name out of them. It was clear enough that Vilienne didn't have the authority to control Orion, though. Anyone with half a mind would hedge their bets with Leohardt.

That was precisely why House Norden's special training program shone. Count Zachary's special "curriculum" consisted of mandatory physical training that even the Count himself participated in, whitewashed stories of glory and fidelity for their

mental training, and brutally strict codes of honesty they were held to. Anyone would lose their mind under such circumstances—in a good way, of course.

Leohardt motioned for them to stop weeping with joy, his eyes glinting.

“Now, I have a special task that only you can accomplish. This will better the whole of the royal family and help Prince Malius take his rightful place as king.”

As they hung on the prince’s every word, they cried out with such unbridled joy that Harold had to shout them down for silence.



ROUGHLY one month after that, the long-awaited sequel to *Even the Stars Cry Upon the Holy Maiden* was released. I never expected a first draft so quickly, let alone the finished book, but it was a testament to the earnest devotion of everyone involved—and the infamous head editor’s greed.

This time, there were none of the real-to-life illustrations of Elizabeth or myself that spurred controversy with the first volume, and the character descriptions were purposefully vague. The illustrations for the first volume would no longer be printed, either, but that was more an effort to reduce the labor required to re-carve the printing blocks. The illustration sensation had already run its course, and the merchants were all about efficiency. That money would be used on marketing instead, or so Lady Selena told me in her letter. In another month’s time, sales were set to begin in Orion and the other neighboring kingdoms.



EVERYTHING was proceeding according to plan. Elizabeth and Lady Lecia were advancing their magic studies by leaps and bounds. Raphael came by every weekend to lecture them on how to improve and assign new homework, but they never seemed to feel discouraged. Lady Lecia’s manners also improved significantly through living with Elizabeth, and her language grew more polished by the day. Once in a while, she would still have an unladylike outburst of determination, but it was becoming a lovable quirk. I

doubted Prince Malius would mind in the slightest. Even Elizabeth understood, and she took care not to scold the fledgling lady too hard. Their schedule became second nature, but I was hardly surprised. Elizabeth was perfection incarnate, acting skills aside.

"I previewed the third years' lessons, so I don't need to study," she said with a smile when I asked her about it.

Lady Lecia, on the other hand, was triple-timing her studies with her magic practice and etiquette lessons.

"Prince Leohardt said that I'll need to work at least this hard as queen," she told me. "I've got nothing if not stamina, though!"

The fact that she was sopping wet from Raphael's water magic at the time only added to her credibility. I didn't have the heart to tell her the truth behind Leohardt's deception, so I didn't reply.

Since *Star Maiden's* sequel was out, Elizabeth seriously needed to work on her acting skills.

"Heed my call!" she shouted stiffly. "Please come to me, Ivliess!"

"GWRAAAAARRGH!"

The three of us were alone in a soundproofed room, so she and Lars were free to shout to their hearts' content. *Star Maiden 2* was propped up on the table in front of them; the scene where the heroine fights the villainess and her dragon was before them.

"Er... Elizabeth? You read the line wrong."

"Oh, you're right. I'm sorry. I can't help but ask Lord Lars politely..."

"Kwrr..."

"It's not your fault your manners are so perfect. I can only imagine how difficult being a villainess must be."

She shook her head. "This is for Lady Lecia's sake. I must be flawless!"

She looked so noble in her determination that I couldn't imagine her as the bad guy. As long as I ignored that she was more darling than devious and I was too smitten to correct her, everything was going perfectly.

Nothing could possibly go wrong now.



MALIUS heard that the sequel to *Even the Stars Cry for the Holy*

Maiden would finally be published in Orion. It was all he could do to keep himself from crying with joy in front of the messenger. He had no idea who the author was, but with such amazing writing skills, they were surely set for life.

If only I had such a talent, he lamented.

Leohardt said that Lecia wanted to see Malius on the throne. He sent letters to Orion almost daily, detailing Lecia's accomplishments, praising her endless courage, and recounting with great alacrity how she overcame every obstacle. When they first read *Star Maiden*, she'd been so sad when she told him she would never have such adventures. Leohardt, however, had changed her mind. He couldn't mope about it forever. No, he had to become worthy of her trust and work himself to the bone.

He knew he had to—but he couldn't.

The void he created in his heart after some twenty years as a failure loomed over him. No matter how his baby brother idolized him or how everyone he knew complimented his sharp wit, he couldn't overcome his fears. If changing was a matter of willpower, he would've reinvented himself ages ago.

He attended many a royal ball to overcome his shyness, but he still couldn't advance past the most basic greetings. Small talk was beyond him, let alone entertaining his guests properly. *Leohardt could do this*, he thought. *If only Lecia were here*. Every blunder wore down his self-esteem further, to the point that he couldn't act princely if he tried.

But Leohardt believed in him. Lecia believed. Their faith in him haunted his every nightmare.

In the novel, the crown prince changed for the heroine to the point where he was barely recognizable. The prince attributed it all to love. Did that mean, then, that Malius was a stranger to love? With time, *Star Maiden* could only bring him pain, and he hadn't touched his copy in months.

If I don't change soon, then I must not love Lecia.



IT was in despair and confusion that Lord Vilienne handed him *Star Maiden's* sequel. The noble had appeared before Malius on official business, but he had unexpectedly approached the prince, careful

that he should never stand taller than Malius on his seat, and pressed the book into his hands.

What?

He was deeply confused as to what etiquette dictated he should do under such circumstances, but he knew that he shouldn't let his uncertainty show. The retainers nearby whispered in troubled tones.

"One of my men sent me this from our neighbor," Lord Vilienne explained seriously. He spoke in a low tone, but fortunately, Malius didn't have to lean over to hear him. The man's theatrics aside, it seemed trouble was brewing near Leohardt's school.

Apparently, Leohardt had fallen head over heels for a foreign noblewoman and was hell-bent on bringing her home and making her his wife. It was causing a ruckus, but it came as no surprise—Leohardt himself had said as much in his letters. It was unlike him, but after seeing the fervor with which the prince wrote about his newfound love, Malius was pleasantly surprised.

Lord Vilienne's report, however, carried with it a new revelation—his lover was none other than Elizabeth la Montlivere, *Star Maiden's* villainess.

"But that's only a story," Malius protested. "It's hardly the first time an author has included a caricature of a noble in their work."

"Is it truly that simple? In the sequel, she returns from exile with a summoned fellwyrms in tow—and one of my spies witnessed this duke's daughter *with* a fellwyrms! Observe—I offer you proof!"

With a flourish, the marquis pulled out an oval-shaped object made of something resembling obsidian. Its spiked ridges framed near-mirror-like faces, and Malius saw his reflection in the surface with startling clarity. A faint aura of mana emanated from it.

"Is that...a scale?" he wondered aloud.

Malius was speechless. If the scale wasn't fake—it would have to be a masterfully carved piece of manacite otherwise—then Lord Vilienne was telling the truth.

"*Star Maiden's* author must have seen through the royals' plots," he hissed. "The book in your hands holds the truth! They've summoned a fellwyrms, and they intend to invade us!"

He made it sound as though war was brewing. At his back, Malius sensed a faint evil aura, as though the fellwyrms were possessing the minister. He narrowed his eyes worriedly, to which

Lord Vilienne nodded vehemently.

“Prince Leohardt has no doubt fallen victim to the wicked dragon’s enchantments! He may well make an attempt on your life, Your Royal Highness.”

“Leohardt? Impossible—and watch your tongue. I’ll only overlook such an accusation once.” Malius sighed and shook his head. His sweet, pure little brother couldn’t possibly do anything so heinous. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you had a vendetta against him.”

Though I suppose I’m rather biased myself.

Lord Vilienne was an unwavering ally of the monarchy. When rumors abounded of Leohardt taking the throne, he had personally quashed them. That wasn’t to say House Vilienne was Malius’ ally. The marquis only cared that the eldest son took the throne, as was tradition. If Malius left the picture, Lord Vilienne would support the genius Leohardt in a heartbeat. His insistence on tracking the second prince’s movements even while abroad testified to that fact.

As Malius brooded, Lord Vilienne took a knee. It was a little too practiced, a little too staged. He met Malius’ eyes, but it was clear he saw a title, not a man, sitting before him.

“Rest assured, my liege. I swear utmost loyalty to you, now and forevermore.”

“Thank you,” Malius replied bluntly.

He didn’t have the tact or courage to call the marquis’ bluff. It was his duty to deal with the present predicament, after all.

Lord Vilienne bowed again as he took his leave. As soon as he was out of sight, Malius placed the novel on the desk. The pulp paper had already absorbed enough of the prince’s nervous sweat to warp slightly. The black-haired maiden on the cover smiled at him. She resembled Lecia, who now felt further from Malius than ever before.

Can people truly change, I wonder?

Chapter 5: The Magic of Love

“ALL living things are born with magic. While there are differences in the amount of mana everyone possesses, sufficient training can increase these reserves. Using a catalyst or other mana source, it is possible to channel mana for extended periods of time...”

The magicology professor continued his lecture as I flipped through my textbook. I’d learned everything well before the year began, not to mention Lord Raphael explained it all to me before my special training sessions.

This sounds quite different now that I have more experience under my belt.

Lord Lars’ skin—or rather, his scales—had been growing glossier as of late, proof that my mana reserves were increasing. Lord Raphael even gave him a piece of manacite to swallow, saying it would absorb the excess mana and prevent Lord Lars from growing too large.

Lady Lecia, on the other hand, was born with a great deal of pure mana. I was far from being her equal, but I had a great deal of experience with hard work and diligence. I should be able to produce results before too long.

“...Well then, let us begin some practical magic drills,” the professor finished as she closed her textbook.

A ripple of excitement ran through the classroom. Even Lady Margaret, who was seated to my right, seemed beside herself with excitement. The spell we would be learning was the same water-generating one that I had grown used to several months prior. The professor wrote it on the board and directed us to attempt it on the cups on our desks. Around me, everyone put their fingers to their respective vessels and concentrated as best they could.

“Filite Rainia!”

Incantations ran out across the classroom, but hardly anyone could create water—after all, simply causing the surface to ripple within the glass was considered a good start. I recalled the first day of my tutoring with fondness.

Lady Margaret furrowed her brow, repeating the incantation several times to little effect. She was highly athletic and strong-willed, with admirable concentration to match, so I had little doubt she'd acclimate to it soon enough.

I leaned into her ear. "Try to imagine the face of the person you love most in the water," I whispered.

She started in surprise and whipped about to face me. The lingering frustration on her face rapidly faded, and after a moment of staring into my eyes, she blushed slightly and returned her gaze to the water.

I mustn't laugh aloud. I'm sure she's too busy imagining Lord Harold's face to be distracted by me.

She glanced back at me, and I returned an encouraging smile. Lady Margaret grinned, then extended her hand towards her glass.

"Filite Rainia."

With that, a mighty spout of water burst out of her glass and over the entire classroom.



"**LADY** Elizabeth, are you all right?!"

As soon as class finished and I arrived at our meeting place, Lady Lecia shouted in alarm. I had let down my hair, and I was wearing a cape for warmth despite the fair weather. The geyser hit me the worst, after Lady Margaret herself, but as my study group was not scheduled to meet after school, I reasoned it would be best to head home without getting changed.

I shook my head. "I'm fine. I'm simply grateful I could witness such a wonderful couple in love."

That fountain was proof of Lady Margaret's love for Lord Harold. I couldn't produce such results while thinking of Prince Vincent.

I've got a great deal of work ahead of me if I'm to be a worthy queen!

I explained the situation to Lady Lecia, and she seemed equally enthused.

"Love becomes power...that sounds so beautiful. I've got to show Prince Malius my love is just as strong then! I'll prove it to everyone!"

“That’s the spirit!”

We took each other’s hands and nodded in agreement. Lady Lecia couldn’t do so when we first met—she had insisted that she could never be so bold as to touch a duke’s daughter—but living together over the past three months had brought us closer. She was an earnest soul. Though she had no talent for academics, she always listened attentively to the teachers’ lectures and asked as many questions as she needed to fully understand the material. Not only that, she took extra etiquette lessons on top of our magic tutelage. She seemed unfazed by her workload, however—she claimed that she had lived half a commoner’s life and was thus confident in her stamina. Indeed, she handled her workload swimmingly, and I was likewise becoming hardier with time.

“Let’s have another wonderful day of practice together, shall we?”

“Let’s!”

We wished each other the best of luck as we boarded our carriage home, basking in the encouraging warmth of the sun’s golden rays.



AS soon as we returned to Father’s mansion, our magic practice began in earnest. Lord Raphael was not present as it was a weekday, but I was already able to produce water at will. I shut my eyes and recalled the sheer force of Lady Margaret’s geyser.

My feelings for Prince Vincent are surely no less than that!

I shut my eyes to concentrate, and Lord Lars let out an encouraging squeal. Luckily, Lady Lecia was no longer terrified of him.

“Flod Rainia!”

I envisioned Prince Vincent’s charming smile as I recited the incantation. Water rapidly gathered in my hands before bursting forward, aimed straight at Lady Lecia. It was my best result by far, no weaker than Lady Margaret’s spell had been.

“Flikker Licht!” Lady Lecia shouted, hands outstretched.

Her Divine Wall formed in front of her, swallowing up the torrent of water.

It had taken a long time for us to reach this point. If my spell

was too weak, the water would fall to the ground and drench the floor before it reached her. If Lady Lecia's concentration faltered, both she and the surrounding furniture would be drenched. Practicing indoors was more stressful than outside, but that aided our concentration. We had removed any vital documents before practice, but fortunately, we had yet to fail inside. Still maintaining our respective spells, we moved on to the next phase.

"So how was your date in Orion with Prince Malius?" I asked.

"Oh, no, I wouldn't call it that. We just took a stroll together, listened to the birds sing..."

"That sounds like a wonderful time to me!"

"You've been going on weekly dates with Prince Vincent, haven't you? I heard that you shared crepes the other—"

"Gweagh?!" Lord Lars screeched irritably.

Oh, dear. Our dates were supposed to be a secret.

"So, what type of person is Prince Malius?" I hurriedly changed the topic. "Is he like Prince Leohardt, perhaps?"

"Well, they look similar, although Prince Malius' hair is a tad plainer. He has eyes like the deepest oceans, and he's always so kind."

Our romantic small talk was not only enjoyable, but it also helped us concentrate on our spells. I'd experienced firsthand how much of a difference thinking of a loved one made in maintaining a spell. Both Lord Raphael and Prince Vincent agreed that it was a valid tactic—although Lord Lars always seemed perturbed by the topic.

I chuckled. "He sounds like a wonderful match for you."

As I imagined Lady Lecia with the still-faceless Prince Malius at her side, I couldn't help but be happy for her.



FOUR short months after Leohardt fell from the balcony, Lady Lecia's Divine Wall was complete. Even Raphael looked unusually serious when he inspected it.

"I imagine this will absorb any mana just fine," he said.

Since then, Lady Lecia had further honed her skills to the point that the wall had become a spherical dome. Anyone standing within it would be immune to any and all magic. It was the perfect

defense.

“Th-Thank you so much, everyone!” Lady Lecia said, tears brimming in her eyes.

Elizabeth took her hands in glee. “Congratulations!”

Oh, that lucky duck. I wish I were Lady Lecia right now.

Harold’s frosty gaze was drilling holes in the back of my head. Apparently, Lady Margaret had caught wind that Lady Lecia was staying with Elizabeth, and she was so jealous that she had done nothing but complain to Harold. On top of that, he was blaming me for something, though I hadn’t the faintest idea what.

Regardless, Lady Lecia relaxed, knowing her hard work was finally over.

“Well, then!” Raphael announced with a sharp clap of his hands. “Let’s move on to the next spell, shall we?”

“Is it offensive magic?” Lady Lecia asked hesitantly.

Elizabeth’s eyes lit up in recognition. “Come to think of it, you did mention you’d be teaching her two spells, didn’t you?”

He nodded. “Exactly. I’ve even devised a unique attack spell, just for you. It’s based on a Fortune Blessing, so it’ll only influence evil things. Think of it as a purifying power. You wouldn’t be much of a saint if you couldn’t smite evil, now, would you?”

There was, fortunately, no common idea of what sainthood entailed in Orion—at least, not according to Leohardt—so we could get away with our script.

Raphael extended his hand, creating a barrier of light identical to Lady Lecia’s. “You’ve already mastered Divine Wall, so this should be simple for you.”

“Okay.”

“You turn the wall into arrows.” He demonstrated this by breaking the wall into numerous small fragments and sharpening them into spears. With a short wave of his hand, he sent the shards raining down upon the nearby shrubbery. “See? Easy.”

“Okay!”

Interestingly, the shrubs seemed undamaged and, in fact, grew somewhat.

Ah, so the holy mana is converted to life energy and returned to the environment. That sort of spell is bound to be at least as difficult as creating a Divine Wall. It’ll take her some time to grow accustomed to it.

Lady Lecia stuck out her hands a tad more dramatically than Raphael had. “First, the wall! Flikker Licht! And now...um...become

arrows!”

She formed the Divine Wall and touched her hands to it. All at once, it broke into shards, as Raphael’s Wall had—except she made far more fragments than he had.

“Fire!”

With that, she swung her hands, and the pieces formed a wall of outward-facing spears around her. The arrows burst out in all directions in shapely arcs, pelting the ground around her like a rain of lightning. The plants hit by her spell sprung to life, flourishing as they never had before. She not only performed it correctly, but she also effortlessly outmatched Raphael.

Elizabeth clapped her hands with glee. “Oh, Lady Lecia, that was wonderful! I’d heard spells are more difficult to control the larger they are, but you handled that perfectly! Your hard work paid off!”

Yes, exactly. I couldn’t have said it better myself.

Reshaping that much mana all at once and firing it with such force, especially considering she hadn’t used an incantation, was beyond my skills. She could likely grab Lars by the scruff of the neck, just like Mother had, if she put her mind to it.

Lady Lecia took Elizabeth’s hands in joy. “Thank you, Lady Elizabeth! I never could’ve done it without your emotional support!”

“No, not at all! You were the one who put in the effort.”

Leohardt and I exchanged a silent look. Judging from his expression, he was as shocked as I was. Raphael attempted to force himself between us to join in our silent celebration, his hands shaped into peace signs, but Harold caught him by the back of his shirt and dragged him back. We were still royalty, after all.

After regaining his composure at a proper distance, Raphael nodded in satisfaction. “Lady Lecia is more of a feeler than a thinker, you understand, so I figured this would be the best way to get the message across. Also, I might add that she did use an incantation to form the Divine Wall, so she wasn’t completely without.”

Ah, I see. So she can’t freely convert a wall into arrows, then.

He clapped his hands to draw our attention. “Well, Lady Lecia, now that you have your special attack, you need a fitting name to shout while you use it. I even have a suggestion for you.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out a long, thin scroll. He untied

the silver and gold ribbon binding it and unfurled it regally. “I recommend ‘Arrows and Agape.’ Perfect, isn’t it?”

“Why, that sounds so romantic!”

The nuance was somewhat off, but Lady Lecia seemed fond of it, and Elizabeth was smiling happily.

Even Harold nodded. “Margaret said it’s critical your attack’s name is easy to pronounce.”

“Is that so?”

Lady Margaret names her attacks, then?

I hadn’t noticed her using any before, but that vicious roundhouse kick she unleashed upon Leohardt’s assailant was burned into my memory. I didn’t mention it to Harold on the off chance he was still upset about it.

Lady Lecia rapidly formed her Holy Wall and sprayed arrows across the garden with glee. At the rate she was going, that entire section of the royal gardens would be overrun with flowers. “Arrows and Agape! Arrows and Agape! Arrows and Agape!”

A short distance away, Raphael spotted Lars hiding and gave him an encouraging wink. The little dragon shuddered in confusion, unsure of what that look entailed. Elizabeth likewise made a big circle with her hands, glowing with confidence. I had even discussed the plan with Father, who had already sent a letter to Orion to prepare.

“It looks like the pieces are finally in place,” I said.

The time had come to put our plan into motion.

Leohardt nodded at me. “Thanks again for your assistance.” He cleared his throat and turned to address Lady Lecia. “Lecia, Lady Elizabeth has agreed to visit Orion with me. We’re returning home!”

Lady Lecia froze in silence.

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!” she cried louder than she had in quite some time.



LORD VILIENNE’S assertions were growing more radical by the day. He had stopped all pretense of claiming Leohardt’s innocence and now insisted the second prince had joined forces with their neighbor to invade Orion and bring their realm to ruin. His “spies” were a veritable font of information, and he whispered their “secret

findings” into Malius’ ears every chance he had. Despite that, there was still no word from Lecia. Vilienne stopped short of any outright treasonous remarks, but it was clear he wished to have Leohardt executed.

“Prince Leohardt is besmirching our kingdom’s fine reputation,” he whispered with such melodrama it belonged in a play. “He’s colluding with foreign powers to tip your lands into civil war.”

Vilienne’s claims had grown so outlandish that the king ordered him to recuperate from his apparent fever at home—a suspension of his authority, in effect. The command incensed the marquis to such an extent that he worked with even greater zeal. Rumors abounded that he was on the verge of losing support from the other nobles and that the pro-Malius faction would appoint a new leader in his stead soon.

The scandal was so great that almost everyone believed Malius himself to be unfit for the throne. Worse yet, the current situation was Malius’ fault. If he couldn’t assuage their doubts, how could he possibly become king?

Malius declined to leave the palace with increasing frequency, staying indoors whenever possible. When he had guests, he worried about the ulterior motives lurking behind their smiles so much that he could hardly breathe. They were judging his every move. He wanted nothing more than to elope with Lecia, but to even suggest such a thing would be a betrayal of his supporters’ trust. Lecia would be disappointed that he was the same coward he always was—she’d hate him.

That was until a knock on his door changed everything.

He had been nearly alone in the throne room. When he opened the door, the king and queen stood before him. Their faces were pale with fear, with a piteous look of adulation in their eyes. The servants, sensing something grave was afoot, retreated to the walls so they would be out of the way. The hall was designed so that the king’s voice could carry easily, but that more secretive conversations could be had without straining one’s voice too much.

The day has finally come, Malius thought. They’re about to strip away my title. Leohardt will be the crown prince now.

“Is something the matter, Your Majesty?”

He took care not to call the man father. He would lose any right to do so soon enough, and it should be clear he was prepared

to accept his fate.

The king did not reply. Even the queen avoided his gaze uncomfortably. Her eyes stopped on the great front doors of the hall behind Malius.

Without so much as a whisper of warning, the monstrous oaken portal creaked open, and Malius turned to see the last people he could have expected.

“L-Lecia?! And Leohardt, what are you doing here?”

“Prince Malius!” Lecia cried.

Sure enough, the servants led in none other than his brother and his beloved, both of whom had left with equally little warning some months prior. Confusion won out over his joy, and he found himself unable to hail them.

After all, at Lecia’s side was the fiancée of the neighboring country’s prince, a beautiful woman with blonde hair and purple eyes. It was as though the villainess had leapt from the pages of the novel.

Chapter 6: Saint Versus Dragon

PRINCE Malius' gaze moved from Leohardt to Lady Lecia and finally to Elizabeth at the head of our group.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Elizabeth's back was ramrod straight when I glanced at her. Her amethyst eyes were fixed firmly on the crown prince before us. Only she, Leohardt, and Lady Lecia were visible from his point of view; Harold and I were intermixed with the servants in the doorway. From the way he stared at Elizabeth, I knew he hadn't spotted me yet.

"You...You look..." he stammered.

From the looks of it, Marquis Vilienne's turncoat servants had done their job—the sequel to *Star Maiden* had reached him and left him shaken. The king and queen of Orion, knowing our plot, looked at Elizabeth with feigned unease. Their acting was so perfect, they left no doubts whatsoever.

Lady Lecia put on a concerned expression. Around her, the servants grew uneasy. Her return should have been cause for celebration, but something was amiss. Inevitably, they too turned their attention to Elizabeth.

The "villainess" smiled. While she was supposed to be smirking evilly, she looked the very image of innocence. We had practiced for hours on end, but that was one thing we failed to improve upon. The only thing practice taught me was that she was incapable of even acting evil. Prince Malius was dumbfounded, no doubt believing the supposed evildoer in front of him could do no harm.

She was, however, our plot's villainess through and through.

Elizabeth threw her arms wide. "I stole your foolish brother's heart, and now I will steal this very kingdom!"

"What?!"

Leohardt nodded, a genuine grin of malice creeping across his face, shadows and all. "I've offered this kingdom and everything in it to Lady Elizabeth. The throne will never be yours, dear brother. Interfere, and we will eliminate you."

“P-Prince Leohardt?!” Lady Lecia called out to him in futility. “Not you, too, Lady Elizabeth! What’s gotten into you?!”

Nobody answered them, of course. We had Vilienne’s former agents with us as well, but they didn’t even bat an eye—Count Norden’s training had given them nerves of steel, and they knew maintaining their poker faces was how they could best fulfill their duties.

“Hahaha!” Elizabeth laughed cheerfully. “It’s no use! Prince Leohardt’s heart is mine!”

Ugh... Those words hit harder than I was expecting them to.

I gritted my teeth in frustration. Harold noticed my plight and surreptitiously held the basket in his arms out to me. He was signaling for me to use it as support. I gratefully leaned on it, letting the wicker creak under my weight.

Orion’s rulers held their heads in mock despair—though between Elizabeth’s out-of-place lightheartedness and Leohardt’s genuine malice, they might have been flummoxed. Most people wouldn’t be able to tolerate such a disconnect.

“No... Whatever is the matter with you, Lady Elizabeth?!” Lady Lecia cried out. “Th-There must be something horribly amiss!”

It was only natural that she’d panic—they’d spent too long together to believe otherwise. Neither of our actors replied to the poor girl.

Prince Malius only stared, dumbfounded, at Elizabeth, though there was a glimmer of recognition in his eyes. “Vilienne was right, then?” he muttered.

I tapped the lid of the basket, signaling to move on to the next phase of the plan.

Elizabeth gave Lady Lecia a small shove, sending her stumbling towards Prince Malius. He tried to catch her but only succeeded in falling to the ground with her. Instead of getting to their feet, they stared up at the duke’s daughter in horror.

“You heard me!” Elizabeth repeated loudly. “This kingdom shall be mine!”

Maintaining our momentum was crucial. If they stopped to consider the details of *Star Maiden*—for instance, the prince’s brother was never engaged to the villainess in the novels—it could all fall apart. If we gave the plot twists enough impact, nobody would question how or why.

“S-Something must be—” Lady Lecia tried to protest again, but

Elizabeth cut her off.

“Enough! Heed my call, O Mighty Ivliess! I release thee from thine bondage!”

It was the same line as the villainess in *Star Maiden’s* sequel. Right on cue, I opened Harold’s basket, and out flew Lars. Releasing the energy stored in his manacite, he grew rapidly.

“GROOOOOOOOWRRR!!”

His massive, scaly body towered high enough that his head grazed the vaulted ceiling. Every scale sharpened to a wicked point, and miasma poured from his gaping mouth. He spotted his targets, and his eyes went blood red. The guards scrambled to defend their charges, but even they seemed terrified at the sight of Lars. For good measure, I cast binding magic so that it’d seem like they were petrified with fear.

Sorry about that.

The king and queen put on a show of suddenly realizing something.

“She’s being controlled by the fellwyrms’ miasma!” His Majesty shouted on cue. “Leohardt, too!”

“But what can we do? Only holy magic can fend off a fellwyrms!” Her Majesty cried theatrically.

Lady Lecia started and looked down at her hands. “Holy magic...?”

Good. Just a little more, now.

“I’ll remove anyone and everyone in Prince Leohardt’s way!”

At the sound of Elizabeth’s voice, Lars glared at Prince Malius. All eyes were fixed on his massive black body as the scales glowed scarlet.

“La...er, Ivliess!” Elizabeth corrected. “Eliminate them!”

“GWAAAAAARGH!!”



The force of his roar rocked the chandelier. Fortunately, Lady Lecia was quick to respond.

“Flikker Licht!”

With that, a shining wall of light formed between Lady Lecia and the rampaging dragon.

“You can use this kind of magic?!” Prince Malius’ eyes flew open in shock as he was protected by the love of his life.

Lady Lecia’s Divine Wall was bigger than I’d ever seen her make it before, and it gave off a steady, reliable glow. It even encircled the king and queen to keep them safe from Lars’ attacks.

The dragon’s gaze darted from target to target. Lady Lecia sufficiently protected herself and her three charges, and all the guards were paralyzed out of the way.

Good. Nobody is in danger.

“GREEEEEAARGH!!”

Lars’ howl tore through the hall, the discordant cacophony rattling windows and hurting ears throughout the room. Mana pulsed and built within his massive maw, and Lady Lecia, sensing an incoming attack, extended her arms to redouble her barrier.

FWOOM!!

A ball of fire flew out of Lars’ mouth. It was deliberately sized so that even if it hit someone or landed on the lush carpet, it would leave nothing more than a few burns. It hit its mark and was hungrily absorbed by the Divine Wall. He peppered it with fireballs, like tossing pieces of bread to ducks, and one by one they were harmlessly absorbed. The important thing was that a creature of his size was actively attacking them—the shock of being the target of such an offensive was rattling enough. Prince Malius was pale and trembling like a small child.

After firing off a dozen or so shots, Lars paused. His shoulders slumped slightly in relief—he was nervous about our plan. Elizabeth readily filled in the gap.

“A saint’s power? Oh, how very troubling! But how will you fare against this next attack?!”

That was, again, a line straight from *Star Maiden*.

Lars slowly oozed miasma from all over his body, letting the dark mana tangibly flow out. The important thing was that he was buying time.

“A saint’s what?” Prince Malius blinked dumbly before turning

to Lady Lecia.

She was literally wielding the power of miracles to save him and his family from what appeared to be certain death. Her eyes were still fixed on her opponent, her feet planted firmly on the floor. None dared call out her unladylike posture.

Leohardt smirked evilly. “Precisely! Lecia acquired those powers to become worthy of you. Unfortunately, this is where y-you...” he faltered, “y-you... you die, dear brother! Her efforts were in vain!”

That was somewhat lacking impact, though I suppose that was rather hard for him to say. You did well, friend.

Worse yet, Leohardt drooped visibly when Prince Malius turned to Lady Lecia with wonder in his eyes.

Don't try to fight him. Love is blinding.

Prince Malius shakily rose to his feet. “Is that true, Lecia? You’re the Star Maiden?” His voice was frail, and there was an intense loneliness in his eyes.

She met his gaze and firmly shook her head.

“No. I’m not.” His eyes flew open in shock, but she continued, “I’m not a character in some novel, and Lady Elizabeth isn’t a villainess, either. That goes for you, too. You’re nobody but yourself. You’re not a storybook prince or a white knight. You’re the same man I met so long ago—the gentle soul who listened to me. The man I fell in love with.” As soon as she said it, she dropped her gaze. “I’m glad I could finally tell you.”

Not even Lady Lecia could maintain a positive outlook all the time. She only came to our country in the first place because of Leohardt’s deception. Back then, she was nothing more than a terrified, ignorant young lady.

Oh, how she’s changed.

“But don’t worry, Prince Malius! I’ll protect you!”

She rolled up her sleeves, ready to go. All traces of her lessons in etiquette were forgotten, but not a soul could doubt her strength now. True rulers didn’t need perfect manners—they needed the resolve to stand on their own two feet and defend their subjects to the death. All a king’s power and authority were for that purpose alone. That was what the crown prince in *Star Maiden’s* sequel said, at least.

Wondering if he’d recognized the significance of her actions, I cast a glance at Prince Malius, but my worries were for naught. A

similar determination burned in his eyes. It was the look of a true king, without a doubt.

Tears brimmed in Leohardt's eyes. "Oh, dear brother! I knew it!" The evil was gone from his face, replaced with elation.

Hey! Don't stop the act now! You'll give everything away!

Fortunately, Prince Malius didn't notice. He stepped forward to be at Lady Lecia's side, grasping her hand to offer her his mana. I could feel the flow of energy between them. She turned to him, surprised, and he steadily met her gaze.

Leohardt's going to be jealous.

"I... I've been a fool," Prince Malius confessed. "I was afraid that we were drifting apart, but you never stopped caring for me, did you?"

"N-No, Your Royal—"

"Now, I can feel your love directly. I want nothing more than to protect you in turn. Won't you let me fight alongside you?"

"Of course!" Lady Lecia wiped away a tear, and her Divine Wall glowed with renewed splendor.

She truly has grown, I thought, paying no mind to my increasingly small role in my own plan.

If she was the same bumpkin who'd first visited the Academy, she would've been unable to stand any part of this. Even though she was far from perfect in her studies, she now had the confidence to stand by her man's side. Not only that, Raphael's little love-into-mana trick was producing fantastic effects for them. The rest of their lives would likely prove no different. She would make a wonderful queen and achieve great things along with Prince Malius. They overcame every mishap and misfortune in their paths and were only stronger for it.

All right, time for the emotional climax.

Elizabeth blew her nose into her handkerchief, trying not to let her happiness for them overwhelm her. "You fools! Go, finish them, Ivliess!" she thundered.

"GWEAAAAAAAARGH!!"

On her mark, Lars took a titanic step forward, shaking the entire room. He let loose another volley of fireballs. This time, they were much larger spheres that burned with a cool purple flame. Once again, Lady Lecia's Divine Wall took the attack head-on. Fortunately, the flames were sucked harmlessly into her barrier.

Within the wall, Lady Lecia tightened her grip on Prince

Malius' hand.

“Arrows and Agape!”

With that, she unleashed a volley of countless arrows at the mighty wyrm.



The arrows almost resembled a meteor shower as they pelted the fellwyrms' scaly body. Everyone was mesmerized by the beauty of it.

"Gweeeeargh?!" Lars howled, spewing miasma erratically.

Elizabeth worriedly rushed to his side. "Lord Lars!"

According to Raphael, the arrows should have no ill effect on Elizabeth, no matter what. Lars shielded himself from the holy rain with his wings, but he only succeeded in throwing off his balance and stumbling awkwardly backward. He toppled and fell.

"Look out!" I shouted. "He's coming down!"

I rushed forward and wrapped my arms around Elizabeth, shielding her as I prepared for the coming blow. "Don't worry, Elizabeth! I've got you!"

"P-Prince Vincent?!"

The moment passed, but no impact came. I turned to find Lars rapidly shrinking as he spewed smoke, his form all but completely obscured.

Ah, I see. So the fellwyrms' mana was purified by Lady Lecia's divine mana, forcing him to return to his usual size.

"Kwii?" came his saccharine chirp a few moments later. He emerged from the fog, back to his diminutive size, as I'd anticipated. "Prrrip?"

"Lord Lars?" Elizabeth gasped in disbelief.

"Preep! Kweeeeee!"

He was spreading his wings wide, still attempting to intimidate us. His eyes flickered blue—*not red, but a pure sky blue*. His overall features were unchanged, but his once-black scales were now white as the driven snow. He was oddly familiar, however.

"A hallowyrm?" Leohardt gasped in disbelief.

With that, it all made sense. Lady Lecia was a saint through and through—she had purified Lars, changing him from wicked fellwyrms to divine hallowyrms.

Nobody said a word. Harold opened his basket to make sure Lars would still fit inside, but even he was silent.

Fortunately, Elizabeth remembered our purpose. She composed herself and smiled at Lady Lecia and Prince Malius.

"That was splendid, both of you!" she praised.

"Lady Elizabeth!" Lady Lecia cried in relief. "So I dispelled the fellwyrms' curse?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "I'm afraid we were never under his influence. This was all an act."

"An act?!"

"Yes, we deceived you both. I'm so very sorry." Elizabeth bowed deeply in apology.

Lady Lecia hurriedly shook her head as if to reassure her, and the king and queen sighed in relief. The rest was up to me.

I cast off my robe, proudly taking Elizabeth's side. Harold picked my discarded disguise off the floor, then revealed himself. He'd scold me for my poor manners later.

Prince Malius' eyes widened in surprise. "Prince Vincent?! And is that you, Lord Harold?"

I nodded. "None other. We put on this farce to show you Lady Lecia's newfound strength. I apologize if we scared you."

Both the king and queen also apologized for their roles in the act. It was all according to Leohardt's request, and their parents had graciously allowed us to put on a show in their palace, but I felt guilty for terrorizing them and their poor servants. The king and queen especially seemed terrified, but they had fortunately regained their composure already and were smiling peacefully.

"That was brilliant," the king congratulated us. "I didn't expect it to be so enjoyable."

The queen nodded in agreement. "I bought into it completely, you know. I had great fun."

Well, that's a weight off my shoulders.

If they enjoyed it, we wouldn't be punished for scaring them. Even Prince Malius smiled as he looked at Lady Lecia. She returned his look and grinned sweetly.

"Yes, it was like a pleasant dream," the crown prince agreed. "Lecia risked life and limb to protect me, and in the process, I was reminded that one's feelings truly can make a difference. I feel as though I can finally change."

"Exactly. Anyone can change, and having someone you love to improve for makes a world of difference," I said sagely. "Just like my own meeting with Eli—er. Never mind."

Leohardt nodded and bowed deeply. "I admire you and love you from the bottom of my heart, dearest brother. I could imagine no better man to be king."

I got the sneaking suspicion Leohardt wasn't referring to brotherly love, but I let it slide for now. Even I had to admit that

Prince Malius seemed like a new man, what with the weight removed from his shoulders. His aqua-blue eyes brimmed with decisiveness, but still had the same tenderness that had haunted him for so long. He had an honesty that Leohardt and I couldn't possibly replicate if we tried.

Harold, don't you dare give me that look. I've got my good points, I swear.

Prince Malius dipped his head toward his brother. "Thank you, Leohardt. I'm sorry. You've attempted to encourage me time and time again, but it seems I was unable to see past my own failings."

"Please don't apologize to me, brother."

"Rest assured, I swear I'll put my best foot forward for the entire kingdom from here on out."

At his side, Lady Lecia dabbed a few errant tears. Elizabeth seemed beside herself with glee as she nodded encouragingly. Even the royal guard surrounding us lowered their arms, placated by the king and queen's words. Fortunately, there was more relief than malcontent—which I chalked up to Prince Malius' virtue. They truly idolized him.

I suppose that's curtains on this little incident, then.

The doors suddenly flew open, and a man rushed in.

"Your Majesty!" he panted in his baritone voice. "Your Royal Highness! Are you unharmed?!"

It appears there's one act left after all.

His robes were ornately decorated, but his sunken, serpentine eyes gave him a wicked look. It was, in all likelihood, Minister Vilienne. He glanced about the room before his eyes rested upon Elizabeth and Lars, and he recoiled in shock and terror.

"Impossible... Prince Leohardt, are you honestly trying to—"

"Enough, Minister Vilienne," Prince Malius cautioned the marquis.

"Go on." Leohardt stepped toward him. "What were you about to accuse me of, good sir?"

Vilienne hastily dropped his gaze. "N-No, I..." He wouldn't dare call Leohardt a murderer under such circumstances. Instead, he jabbed his finger at Elizabeth and her scaly white companion, his face twisting with overwrought rage. "Is that not a *dragon*?! Who would dare bring such a vile and dangerous fiend here?!"

"Minster Vilienne!" I started in anger, but Harold held me back with a curt shake of his head.

“Your Royal Highness,” he whispered, cautioning me.

Instead, Elizabeth stepped forward to field his question. “Lord Vilienne?”

She smiled innocently, and her sweetness caught the wrathful minister off guard. Then she proceeded to say the last, most brilliant thing she possibly could have given the circumstances—and off the cuff, no less.

“This is my cat,” she confidently announced.

“C-Cat?!” Vilienne did a double take.

“Mrgh,” grunted Lars. “Mrrrg... Mrraowr?”

The sheer audacity of her assertion sent a tremor down my spine. Even better was the look of mixed confusion and humiliation on Lars’ face as he was suddenly forced to play along. He was still her familiar, and that meant he had to obey her every whim, no matter how fickle.

What a lucky duck—er, I mean, poor fellow.

“Of course, he’s my cat,” she insisted adorably. “Look, if I scratch his sweet little chin, he even purrs for me.”

“Gragh...PRRRRRRRRRR!!”

He began to “purr” with all his might, producing a puzzling growl that was only made more unsettling by the way his blue eyes flashed with the effort. To be fair, he *did* seem harmless enough now, but the issue lay elsewhere. His devotion to Elizabeth was blinding, and she was touching him to an enviable degree.

I snapped my fingers, and Harold briskly turned to the servants.

“Tell them,” he instructed.

One of them stepped forward—the man who had attempted to murder Leohardt.

“Please allow me a word!” the servant bellowed. “Marquis Vilienne, the man before you, ordered us to assassinate Prince Leohardt! He falsely used the name of His Majesty the King to do so!”

The reformed servants behind him raised their voices in agreement. To them, Vilienne was the traitor, and they would not be silenced. Even the royal guards and surrounding servants were shaken by the news, and the muttering only grew.

Vilienne quivered with rage. “You worms! How *dare* you betray me?! You told me yourselves that Prince Leohardt was colluding with that wretch!”

The king, however, paled and turned to face him. "Vilienne, you didn't." His family had served Orion generation after generation, but he had finally pushed too hard. "Guards, arrest Marquis Vilienne! See that he's locked away, and put a watch on him so he doesn't cause any further trouble!"

"As you will!"

Vilienne bit his lip as the armed guards approached him—but a moment later, he sneered wickedly. "Bwahaha! Just try to catch me! I won't even need the full extent of my powers to best you!"

He pulled something small and black out of his sleeve, along with a handful of manacites. He shut his eyes to concentrate as he began his incantation.

"Is that what I think it is?!" I gasped.

Leohardt squinted. "Isn't that one of Lars' scales? As in, a fellwyrms scale?"

Elizabeth blinked. "Lord Lars? Why?"

At the word "fellwyrms," unease rippled throughout the room.

Vilienne threw his arms wide. "O great evil lost to antiquity, heed my call! Manifest before us in thine vile splendor!"

The magic circle engraved on the scale spewed miasma, and it hungrily absorbed the manacites into itself. Then, the glinting black scale lashed out a dozen black tentacles, entwining itself around the sickly nobleman's form.

"Haha, *this* is how you truly summon a fellwyrms! Your so-called cat is nothing compared to this!"

"Grmraow?"

Lars gave him a confused look, despite Vilienne's triumphant grin, as he rapidly warped into something less than human.

I don't blame Lars for being baffled. He's gone from fellwyrms to hallowyrms to "housecat" in so many minutes. I bet he doesn't even recognize the scale as his anymore.

The guards moved to strike the marquis down, but I held out my hand to stop them. They wouldn't be needed here.

"You know what to do, hallowyrms Lars," I told him.

He glared at me as if he could tell I was poking fun. "Grwaaarr!"

"I'll help, too!" Lady Lecia chimed in. "It's my job as a saint to save this country from evil!"

To make a long story short, it was a slaughter. Vilienne didn't

last a second. He was a half-baked, spur-of-the-moment fellwyrn at best, and he was being tag-teamed by both a saint *and* a proper hallowwyrn. To Lady Lecia's merit, the malevolent marquis wasn't killed—the fellwyrn portions of his transformation were dissolved into nothingness by her divine powers. I doubted that he could truly appreciate that, however, as he was swiftly marched into the dungeon by the guards.

Since the succession issues plaguing the kingdom of Orion were resolved, not to mention the formal acceptance of Lady Lecia as Prince Malius' bride, we were free to return home. That, truly, was the end of it.

Leohardt was still watching the future king and queen with a smile as we were about to leave. Since I was every bit as two-faced as he was, I could tell his happiness wasn't heartfelt. He had stood by Prince Malius' side as his closest friend and confidant for many years, but he had officially been replaced. It had to be hard to watch, even if he was ultimately the one responsible. I understood how he felt—I'd gladly sacrifice myself to put Elizabeth with another if it would make her happy.

Or could I? The thought is torture. I hope I never, ever have to make that sort of decision. I suppose that's one point for you, Leohardt.

There was the issue of *how* Vilienne came across one of Lars' scales in the first place, but I'd have the time to look into that later.

"All right, Lord Lars. Let's head home." Elizabeth ushered Lars back into Harold's basket, where he curled up neatly at the bottom. Something about his movements struck me as oddly catlike.

I cast him a disapproving look. "I wonder if they'd worship you as a dragon-saint for life if I made you a nice little temple far, *far* away from us?" I muttered.

As I pondered how to get rid of him, the tiny drake glared at me and hissed.

Chapter 7: The Second Prince's Return

HALF a month had passed since we solved the dilemma Leohardt forced upon us. Prince Malius and Lady Lecia had already formally announced their engagement. Given her status as a baron's daughter and her striking resemblance to the *Star Maiden*—in appearance and ability—she was widely welcomed by the public. The overwhelming popularity of *Star Maiden's* sequel in Orion played a part in that.

Duke la Montlivere's family offered to adopt Lady Lecia as their daughter should there have been any resistance, but Orion's king and queen openly approved of their union. Prince Malius had chosen her himself, so the circumstances of her birth were summarily ignored.

The nobles who had advocated for Leohardt to take the throne were placated as well; Prince Malius and Lady Lecia explained their plans for the kingdom's future in great detail, and the nobles were accordingly sated. I was concerned that Leohardt had tipped the scales by showing them the kind of man he truly was, but it was ultimately none of my business. The important thing was that the whispers of malcontent had been silenced.

There were rumors that one of Prince Malius' political opponents attempted to summon a fellwyrn against him, that his overwhelming introversion was the result of said dragon's curse, and that Lady Lecia used her saintly powers to break the curse and vanquish the dragon. This time, the word on the street wasn't far from the mark.

Nonetheless, with the blessing of an actual saint on their side, the people of Orion felt optimistic about their future. Depending on how their future leaders governed, their hopes could well be realized.

That was all well and good, of course.

"What I want to know is what *you're* doing here."

I glared at Leohardt, who was back in my palace. I came down for dinner, only to find that the second prince had returned when I

was positive we'd parted ways in Orion.

He smiled innocently and shrugged. "What, did you forget I'll be studying here for a year? I can't imagine the Academy would take kindly to Lecia and me dropping out at once."

"Oh, come off it. You can't stand to see Lady Lecia and Prince Malius acting all lovely-dovey, can you?"

He averted his eyes, the life rapidly draining from his face. "Don't put it like that, Vincent."

Mother nodded in agreement. "Precisely. Can't you show him a little more sympathy? He thanklessly saved his entire country from disaster, you know."

Technically, I thanklessly saved a country that wasn't even mine from disaster.

Unfortunately, Leohardt's gift had him soundly in my parents' good graces. It was a painting of Elizabeth commanding Lars in his giant hallowyrm form. Elizabeth was basking in Lar's otherworldly light, glowing like an archangel or even a goddess. I hated to admit it, but it was a masterpiece. Not only that, it placated my parents' desire to see my fiancée in the heroic light they'd missed during the chaos in Orion. The matter of whether he was even permitted to commission a painting of a foreign prince's fiancée fighting off one of his country's minister's attempts to murder her was a bit of a grey area in and of itself, but my parents knew they couldn't have come along for the grand finale. It was the closest they could come to the real experience.

To be fair, if I'd missed Elizabeth in all her glory like that, I'd be pouting for at least a decade.

"I must admit, Lady Elizabeth is quite wonderful," Leohardt said, the light returning to his eyes. "She's almost as radiant as my dear brother, almost as kind and gentle as him, almost as impartial and fair as him, almost as pure-hearted..."

"Can't you admire her by any other means?" I snapped at him.

He sighed as he swirled his grape juice around in his glass. "At least you get to marry her."

Even Father nodded sagely. "One cannot ask for too much, my son."

"Don't take her for granted now," Mother added. "You should be humbler and more self-reflective."

Don't tell me you two want to marry Elizabeth as well, now?

Now that I thought about it, it *did* sound like Leohardt wanted

to marry Elizabeth. The thought that I may lose my place in the world struck me. If nothing else, all three of them were too demanding of me. A familiar nightmare rose to my mind—the one in which Father declared my marriage to Elizabeth moot. For a split second, I was terrified they might let Leohardt marry her instead.

They would never...would they?

I broke out in a cold sweat.

Leohardt, on the other hand, gave Father a sugar-sweet grin. “I wouldn’t mind putting myself up for adoption, you know. Why don’t you let Lady Elizabeth marry—”

Father shot him a frigid glare. “If you dare try for Lady Elizabeth’s hand in earnest, We will have you exiled on the spot.”

Judging from the intensity of Father’s words, I was afraid he might strangle Leohardt on the spot instead of exiling him. He even gave Leohardt’s devilish smile a run for its money.

“That’s awfully harsh,” Leohardt replied calmly, but from where I sat, I could tell he was shaken.

I’m a little relieved. Of course, they’d favor their son over a foreigner.

“After all,” Father continued, “Lady Elizabeth cannot give birth to Our grandchildren if she weds you.”

Oh. Right. Of course.

Mother nodded in agreement.

It would be easy enough to accept that they wanted grandchildren to continue the Weissworth bloodline, but I had a feeling there was more to it.

What am I, then? What point is there to my being born?

I shoved aside my thoughts. There was no point in mulling over such nonsense.

Leohardt smiled as though everything was as it should be before continuing to eat. Perhaps due to the lingering effects of Father’s glare, he hardly said another word. He knew he wouldn’t make it as Father’s son—there were times I was impressed I’d made it to seventeen as it was.

I’ve still got much to improve on, though.



THE clock’s hands pointed squarely at noon, and the cathedral’s

bells let out a blessed toll. I'd waited anxiously for nearly an hour, but that sound was enough for me to straighten my posture. Moments later, the doors of the parlor opened, and a lady-in-waiting let Elizabeth inside.

"Good day to you, Prince Vincent, Prince Leohardt."

"It's a pleasure to see you again," I replied courteously.

"A pleasure indeed," Leohardt echoed.

She curtsied politely to us—not just me, unfortunately. Lars' snow-white head peered out from behind her back. While she exchanged greetings with Harold, I snatched the diminutive dragon up by the wings and peeled him off Elizabeth's dress.

It had been a full month since Elizabeth's last visit. Settling matters after our return from Orion took longer than anyone expected. I'd mulled over how best to invite her to the palace for weekly visits, as we had arranged during her magic studies, but fortunately, she was eager to accept. Now there was nothing to distract us, particularly given that Lady Lecia was happily reunited with Prince Malius.

Now we can finally go on dates!

I'd long dreamed of expertly escorting her around the palace, but we'd only been able to do so once. This time, I wanted to spare no expense in making Elizabeth swoon.

Unfortunately, given our current entourage, that would be impossible. Leohardt was sticking to me to an irritating degree, and Lars didn't even consider that I might want time alone with my fiancée. Given their respective status, I couldn't order them removed by the guards either. It seemed like we'd have a third and fourth wheel with us.

While I was busy lamenting the loss of our privacy, Leohardt struck up a bit of small talk with Elizabeth. Lars struggled free of my hold, landing heavily on the ground before scampering to the hem of Elizabeth's skirt and rubbing his cheek against her.

"Grmraow?" he chirped, showing off his pearly-white fangs in the process.

What are you, a real cat now? What happened to that cutesy growl you used to have?

While I stared slack-jawed at him, he rolled over on the marble floor, exposing his porcelain underbelly and letting out a growl that sounded unmistakably like a purr.

"Not now, Lord Lars," she chided him. "I'm in the middle of

talking with Prince Leohardt.”

She lowered her hand towards him, and Lars eagerly stood back up, arching his back so that she could reach him more easily. Elizabeth scritchd behind his horns as she talked with Leohardt.

What's with that practiced hand? You'd think she's been petting him like that continuously this past month. What happened between them? He's not starting to win her favor, is he?!

He continued with his bleating mew and purrs as she petted him.

To begin with, she only called him a cat in the spur of the moment to allay suspicions. I never imagined he would truly become her pet. I was baffled that virtually every person Elizabeth met was taken with her so easily.

Leohardt attempted to take her hand, but at that moment, Lars reared up and hissed at him. “Lady Elizabeth,” he said, ignoring Lars, “I’ve decided to stay in this country for a while. I’ve much to learn at your side, just like Lecia changed by leaps and bounds with —”

“Oh, that’s right!” she interrupted him. “She sent me a letter the other day, along with a great number of her family’s famous pumpkins!” Luckily, Elizabeth seemed oblivious to Leohardt’s attempts to woo her. The pumpkins excited her more. “She’s formally engaged to Prince Malius now, isn’t she? I’m so very happy for them! She told me they would be announcing it publicly as soon as you returned home.”

Her words stabbed Leohardt’s heart like arrows.

So Lady Lecia keeps in touch with her, then?

It made sense—Elizabeth helped her out a great deal, and they were both future queens. They surely had much to share.

As an aside, Lady Lecia and Prince Malius weren’t waiting for Leohardt’s return—rather, they knew his continued “study abroad” was his attempt to avoid the celebrations altogether, but they couldn’t hold the ball without him. It was a sore subject for him. He had gone so far as to apply for a second semester at the Academy, and my parents were quite troubled by it.

Leohardt’s gaze drifted across the room, his expression tensing. Elizabeth’s obliviousness to such matters held strong, as she seemed perplexed by his reaction. She expected him to be overjoyed, given all the work he’d gone through to bring the couple together.

I closed my eyes, reminiscing on the soul-crushing days when

she'd give me the same infuriatingly dense treatment. Her impenetrable defense was the best offense.

Lars looked up at Leohardt with a hint of confusion. He also had a history of not being noticed by her. Being her pet was likely his best and only chance at genuine happiness.

"You'll be there, won't you, Elizabeth?" I chimed in. "*With me*, of course."

I couldn't, in good conscience, let the conversation continue uninhibited. Leohardt glanced at me, then at Elizabeth. That was all it took for me to decipher his intent.

It was surprisingly perfect. All Leohardt wanted was her forgiveness. He wanted her to forgive him for enveloping us and our kingdom in his scheme. If she did so, he would feel accepted by Prince Malius himself. She was virtually identical to his brother in her honesty and kindness. Elizabeth didn't see any reason to forgive him in the first place, though—she wasn't upset by her forced involvement in his ploy, and she'd barely registered his feelings in the first place. That was, again, a trait she shared with Prince Malius.

"You need to tell her," I advised him. "*Especially* if it means so much to you."

Since they were essentially from different worlds, she would never understand unless he told her directly.

"I know." He took a deep breath, then turned back to her. "Lady Elizabeth, as I'm sure you're aware, I have a few attitude issues. I pretend to be perfect around my brother and most people, but I'm afraid that persona isn't the *real* me."

She blinked at him in surprise, startled by the sudden seriousness in his tone, but she didn't interrupt him.

He furrowed his brow in consternation. "Lecia is a bright young woman, so she suits my brother far better than I do. Nobody with secrets as dark and heinous as mine deserves to stand beside such a brilliant man. If he knew the real me, he'd abandon me without a second thought. You see, I was *jealous* of Lecia."

Lars gave me a prompting look, but I made no move to stop Leohardt. If someone like Lecia appeared before Elizabeth—perfect inside and out—I'd feel the same way. Leohardt had been running from his insecurities for a long time, but with Elizabeth's strength, he was attempting to face his demons. Only her genuine forgiveness could ease his pain. I gave Lars a knowing look, and, satisfied with

my answer, he sat with his tail around his feet and waited.

"I wanted nothing more than to be a man worthy of my brother's love," he confessed.

"Oh, Prince Leohardt. I can only imagine." She nodded deeply without breaking eye contact, a soft smile on her face. "But don't worry. You deserve his love as much as anyone."

He raised an eyebrow in doubt. "No, but he—"

"It doesn't matter what kind of person you say you are," she asserted. "You've done all this to make your brother happy, haven't you? Even if you're putting on an act, your feelings are yours and yours alone. It's not who you pretend to be, but who you truly are, and you've made that clear to him."

"You...You really think so?" he replied weakly.

Her reply moved him and me. I always assumed that my true self was something I kept bottled deep inside, and if not for Elizabeth, I wouldn't be anything like the man I was today. I was convinced that meant that, deep down, I was a wicked soul. If what she told Leohardt was true—if his actions determined his character instead of his innate virtue—then maybe I was the same.

Elizabeth smiled bashfully. "Or at least, that's what I tell myself. Sometimes it's hard to keep faith. I'm dreadfully lazy at home, and I often make the most irresponsible demands. Oh, and I eat far too many sweets."

"Really?" I blurted out awkwardly.

She narrowed her eyes at me slightly. "Of course. Not everyone is perfect—though I suppose you may be the exception who proves the rule."

Uh... No comment.

I could tell how much she trusted me, and it was unsettling. Lars' eyes glittered with an ominous mixture of every color imaginable, and he used his mana to release sparkling rainbow-colored vomit all over the floor.

Does he really need to do that?

While the violence Lars was unleashing on the parlor rug brought me to my senses, Leohardt was oddly silent. To him, Elizabeth's words carried as much weight as Prince Malius'. If she accepted him, cruel streak and all, the conclusion was obvious.

Elizabeth beamed at him as if to give him another nudge toward the light. "Your feelings for your brother are real, Prince Leohardt. I'm sure Prince Malius knows that."

Leohardt was silent for a long moment, but a glimmer not unlike a shooting star's glow appeared in his eyes. Before I realized what was happening, his lips curved into a *smile*. It was the first time I'd ever seen him look genuinely happy—there was no hint of devilish intent, only joy befitting a young man his age.

"Thank you, Lady Elizabeth. The fog that's hung over my heart for so long has finally lifted. My brother isn't the type to forsake someone so easily. He won't cut ties with me, I'm sure. It seems so obvious now, but I was scared to death of just that."

She nodded. "Everyone feels anxious at times, especially towards those they hold most dear."

Leohardt reached out to take her hands, but Lars jumped up and into his arms, cutting him off from her.

Good work.

The second prince didn't mind in the slightest. "I'd best return to Orion, then. I need to give my dear brother's betrothed a proper welcome by hazing—er, helping her get used to the palace. There's much to do."

"I'm sure they'll love to have you."

"I'm glad you're ready to go home." I smiled at him. "Why don't I help you pack?"

I signaled to Harold, telling him to prepare Leohardt and his entourage for the journey home. Ideally, he'd be gone by the day after tomorrow—the sooner he left, the less likely he was to change his mind. I was concerned about what he was *really* planning to do to Lady Lecia, but it was the best I could do given the circumstances. He looked awfully like an abandoned puppy, so I showed him that small kindness.

More importantly, now that Leohardt was out of the way, I could take my rightful place at Elizabeth's side.

If that's how she feels, though, maybe—just maybe—she'll accept me for who I really am, too.

A sharp tug at my sleeve stopped my advance. I turned to find Harold there. He sternly met my eyes. "If I may, Your Royal Highness, I don't believe your true nature is as wicked as Leohardt's," he whispered. "I believe you're just a simp."

"A what?"

"A simp. Don't you know the word?"

"I know what a simp is!"

He fixed me with the frostiest gaze I'd seen in a while. It was

less frigid than pitying, or perhaps sympathetic—it was hard to describe exactly. Nonetheless, it made me think twice. I decided to wait to confess my true nature to Elizabeth for another day.

At the end of Elizabeth's and my year at the Academy, Leohardt returned to Orion proper, and as we prepared for our formal engagement ball, we received an invitation from abroad.

Epilogue: Happiness Forevermore

THE day we celebrated our second-year graduation was in the middle of a beautiful autumn. There wasn't so much as a cloud in the sky, to the point that the heavens seemed open to us. It was as bright as Elizabeth and my future together, and it felt as though I could soar.

As my mind wandered, the carriage completed its short course along the cobbled roads to the la Montlivere Mansion, Elizabeth's home. Harold ushered me to the front gates, where my fiancée was already waiting with one of her maids.

"Thank you very much for visiting, Your Royal Highness."

Her words were standard and formal as always, but her smile seemed especially gentle. She led me through the gate and into the atrium, revealing the duke's mansion in all its grandeur. The vaulted ceilings reached as high as the heavens themselves.

Finally, we arrived in the front foyer, where I found the duke and duchess—both of whom seemed nervous—as well as Elizabeth's two older brothers awaiting us. I knew that the brothers were often busy maintaining the realm. If even they were here, His Grace clearly meant business. My palms began to sweat.

"Thank you for receiving me so cordially," I managed to say.

"Of course!" His Grace said with an equally nervous smile. "I consider it a pleasure and a privilege to see you."

"I brought you a gift," I said, reaching for the parcel in Harold's hands. "The palace pâtissier put a great deal of effort into —"

I cut myself short as I realized my critical error. The package contained a custom variety of sweets and confections, including cakes, macarons, chocolate truffles, and more. It was an assortment of all Elizabeth's favorite things, carefully chosen from the desserts she enjoyed most during her visits to the palace. In other words, it was a perfect gift *for Elizabeth*, whereas courtesy dictated I bring a gift for the whole House la Montlivere.

Harold, noticing my troubled look, narrowed his eyes.

"I had assumed you chose this willingly," he whispered. "Was it not your intent?"

"It wasn't," I whispered back.

"I see."

Despite our low voices, Elizabeth's entire family could likely hear our every word. Elizabeth herself blushed and averted her gaze. She was pleased by my gift, but more than that, she was embarrassed by my blunder.

It's not that bad, is it? I hope it's not.

I was there to formally ask for Elizabeth's hand in marriage as well as to codify our engagement anew. I'd been planning to do so ever since the morning of Lars' first appearance.

With a gift like this, I was off to the worst start imaginable. Ignoring her family so pointedly was like openly declaring that I loved Elizabeth to the point that I'd lost my mind, and most self-respecting families would show a suitor like that to the door.

To be fair, I do love her to the point of insanity and beyond.

"Today is truly perfect weather for—"

"You must be thirsty! We've prepared some light refreshments for you."

I tried to change the topic, but the duke had the same idea, and we ended up interrupting each other. The duke seemed bothered that he had interrupted me when I was trying to get straight to the point, but it wasn't the time or place for that. Manners dictated that we move to a parlor first.

"Let me show you the way," His Grace finally said, standing to lead the way out of the room. He seemed as composed as before, but I knew that he was still as flustered as I was.

Oh, how am I such a mess?! I've been engaged to her for nine whole years now. How am I this nervous?!

Fortunately, I'd recomposed myself by the time we relocated and started a bit of small talk with Elizabeth's brothers with my dignity intact. The table the drinks were on was a tad too far away from the seats for us to sit and talk, but the room was arranged so that we could stand and chat without difficulty. The duke knew I would be too tense to sit down during our conversation.

I fixed my eyes on His Grace at Elizabeth's side, the man who would soon become my father-in-law. On her other side was the duchess, and behind them, her brothers. Elizabeth's posture was as flawless as always, but her cheeks were more flushed than usual,

and her smile was strained enough to suggest she was nervous.

Her eyes met mine, and she gave me courage. I wasn't the smitten little boy who cried himself to sleep over her beauty anymore. There was only one thing I had to say.

"I swear I will make Lady Elizabeth—your fair daughter—happy. Rest assured, I'll care for her with all my heart and soul."

The kingdom had been stable for years. Our political influence was slowly on the rise, but that was no excuse for me to grow complacent. I had to work all the harder for her.

The duke's face reddened slightly, and I caught a hint of a tear in the duchess' eye. Letting their daughter marry had to be a herculean feat, even if it aligned with her own will. If she happened to give birth to a daughter, we would surely—

No, I can't. I swear I'm about to cry.

I bit my lip as the duke nodded readily.

"I was always so proud of the letters she would write you as a child," he said. "I know well that you've likewise treasured her for many years."

Between his wording and the look he was giving me, the subtext was clear. He knew my affections for her had been purely one-sided until recently, and he pitied me greatly for it.

This is far more painful than I thought it'd be. Her parents understood all those love poems I wrote her, then, but she didn't? That stings.

He cast a sidelong glance at his daughter. She was blushing embarrassedly, but I could tell from the smile on her face that she was genuinely happy. He then made eye contact with me and pointedly cleared his throat.

Suddenly, it clicked.

What if, between the many years I took to confess my love to her and Elizabeth's failure to sort out her own feelings for me, her parents were also troubled?

It was a passing thought, but the duke and duchess both seemed genuinely happy. Her father turned to me and said the same thing he told me when I was a young boy.

"Please take good care of Elizabeth, Your Royal Highness."

The duchess pressed a kerchief into the corners of her eyes, overcome by emotion. Elizabeth smiled at both of her parents in turn before looking at me.

"Just being by your side is all the happiness I'll need, Prince

Vincent.”

“Likewise, Elizabeth.”

Our future stretched infinitely before us as the light of the setting sun cast its rosy spell. The refreshing breeze that drifted in from the open window carried with it a hundred hopes and dreams.

Oh, I wish I could marry her tomorrow, I thought before composing myself and taking her hands in mine.



Extra 1: The Fellwyrn and His Feelings

SUCH agony.

With a sickening concerto of cracking, his skin split and peeled to reveal row after row of obsidian scales beneath. The miasma had already snuffed out the meager few candles the room had housed, leaving him alone in perfect darkness. The fellwyrn had no idea what he was doing in such a place or why, but one thing was clear: his desire to burn and destroy miraculously aligned with the former will of whatever fool had summoned him.

I must destroy this “beauty” he seemed to loathe so.

That was simple enough. If the summoner’s wish had been anything different, he wouldn’t have responded to the call and let himself be bound so readily.

He shattered the window and sailed out into the moonless night on his newly grown wings. The mansion beneath him was stirring to life as lights took to the windows, but whatever they were attempting, it was too late. Nobody alive could stop the fellwyrn now.

But what is the meaning of this minuscule form?

The once-mighty drake looked down at its new body. His human summoner had no shortage of malice for him to draw from, so there should have been no issue with his vessel. As puzzling as that was, he also found himself drawn in a particular direction, as though it were calling to him.

Could this be a contract? With me, Ivliess? Inconceivable.

As he discarded the possibility, he arrived at a mansion surrounded by a carefully tended garden. He circled the building a few times before locating the window he was being drawn to. For some incomprehensible reason, he found the glass impossible to break. He could see a blonde woman lying on a bed through the crack in the curtain. Her face was buried in a pillow, and she was kicking her legs in the air.

He tapped at the window with his hard-pointed snout, careful not to startle her. Eventually, she noticed him and drew back the

curtain to get a better look.

“What...?”

Their eyes met, and memories stirred in the fellwyrms’ head. He remembered staring at the young woman’s smile for hours on end, but never head-on. In fact, he couldn’t recall her ever noticing him before. The woman—Elizabeth, that was her name—only ever had eyes for another.

“Lord Lars?” she said hesitantly.

At the mention of that name, his heart skipped a beat.

“Queargh!” he chirped back at her.

Elizabeth opened the window. Warm air hit his iron-scaled cheek. She reached out to him, and he found himself filled with indescribable joy, the likes of which he’d never dreamed.

Why was I ever so angry in the first place?

At that moment, the fellwyrms abandoned his destructive ambitions and became Lars, heart and soul.

Or rather, he tried to become Lars. Being taken to the palace was well and good, but as soon as he laid eyes on that horrible wretch of a man, his fury flowed back with greater force than it ever had before. It was difficult to tell Lars’ memories apart from his own twisted desires. It was clear as day why he was contracted to become the girl’s guardian dragon in the first place.

He could remember a black cat that loved to sit on Elizabeth’s lap. It was the same cat she had knighted, the one who had scratched his cheek so badly many months ago. It was unable to ward off that horrible wretch Vincent, but the cat was close to her in ways nobody else could be. Becoming her pet was his goal—his very reason to live. If he did good work, she might even scratch his horns with those heavenly hands of hers.

And so, he resolved to wait and muster his mana until the perfect opportunity arose.



AS soon as Lars laid eyes on Raphael, he let out an ungodly hiss, not unlike a frog exploding.

I could’ve sworn he’s made that sound before.

I cast a sidelong look at Raphael, but he smiled innocently and ignored me.

It was the day of Operation: Saintify Lady Lecia's after party, as Raphael dubbed it, but it was clear he only wanted to see the result of Lars' transformation into a hallowyrm. He was invited to the palace with Elizabeth, as she felt she had to thank him for teaching her and Lecia.

The entire time Elizabeth gave Raphael her thoughtful thank-you gifts, Lars sat beside her and stared at the purple-haired mage, his legs dangling off the table in contempt. He was the same as ever on the inside, transformation or no.

They reminisced at length about the training, after which they cordially exchanged smiles and bows. The conversation was neither too long nor too short, and he seemed a little too comfortable with her.

I hope he shrinks. Does he need to be that much taller than her?

I glanced at Lars to find him looking at his claws, up at Raphael, and back again. He was missing the massive talons he'd had when he was a giant. I gave him an awkward pat on the shoulder as if to reassure him.

"Now, then," Raphael suddenly said as he snapped to face us, "do you mind if I take a look at him?"

"You don't mind, do you?" Elizabeth asked him.

Raphael was smiling innocently enough, but I could tell from the look in his eyes that he was dying to study the little hallowyrm. Murderous rage would be more reassuring, honestly.

Lars shivered, but he was powerless to deny his mistress' request. He boldly stuck out his tail and flew to Raphael.

"Raphael says he'd like to see your mana," Elizabeth explained. "He'd like to have one of your scales, too."

He nodded. "They say hallowyrm scales can cure any illness, after all."

In other words, he wanted to help people. I couldn't imagine he would go so far as to steal one of Lars' scales by force, but Elizabeth wanted to aid his efforts. Lars trembled again, his eyes watering, but he couldn't refuse for fear of making Elizabeth look bad. He nodded.

Raphael grinned. "Excellent! Don't mind if I do, then." With that, he grabbed hold of Lars' tail.

"Hold on," I interrupted. "We'll give you some space to work."

I took Elizabeth by the hand and led her out into the garden, where we sat at a picnic table prepared for us. I doubted his ability

to hide his eccentricities given the circumstances, so it was better if Elizabeth was out of sight.

We'd made many memories in the garden, which was the main place where Lady Lecia and Elizabeth practiced their magic. Most of the flowers were still in full bloom, despite winter fast approaching, and it felt oddly warm.

Is this the result of Lady Lecia's powers? Holy magic is truly amazing.

I strained my ears a little to listen for Raphael and Lars.

"Don't worry, this won't hurt a bit," I heard him coo. "You'll only feel a little pinch, and you should grow it back in no time."

"S-Sqeeeeeegh?!"

"Oh, do you mind if I take one of these, too? You've got such *strong* mana in the scales on the back of your little head!"

"Queeeeeeeh!!"

Wait, did he just take two?

Elizabeth didn't notice, either because of her trust in him or the tantalizing assortment of pastries in front of her. She didn't so much as glance in the direction of her familiar.

Shortly after, Raphael rejoined us with Lars lying limp in his arms.

"Thank you so much for your cooperation! I got wonderful samples, and they'll make a great addition to the Ministry of Magecraft's archives."

"Lord Lars!" Elizabeth cried. "Are you all right?!" She hurriedly took him from Raphael and set him down on her lap. The only sign he was still awake was the sporadic twitching of his tail.

"Oh, he's just a little tired from having his scales taken," Raphael explained. "It depletes his mana. He'll be fine with a little rest but don't spoil him too much, or your fiancé might get jealous."

I laughed stiffly. "Who, me? I'm not the jealous type."

Elizabeth giggled. "No, not jealous at all."

Elizabeth was the only one of us who didn't know how envious I could be. It wasn't a joke in the least.

Lars' eyes slowly flickered blue as he came to.

Good. Let's have Raphael take another scale or two now.

Raphael let out a heavy sigh. "I must admit, I'm rather disappointed. Hallowyrm scales are valuable, yes, but I would've loved a matching fellwyrms scale or two to accompany them. I can't imagine he'll ever be a fellwyrms again, either."

"I suppose not," Elizabeth said as she looked up.

"Not with all his miasma having been purified."

"Isn't that wonderful, Lord Lars?" she said to the little dragon. "Now, even if the contract between us is broken, you'll be free to do as you please!"

"Qwergk?!" He bounced to his feet. The thought had never even occurred to him.

"Hold on, now," I cut in. "We wouldn't want rumors getting out that our hallowyrm has left us so soon. I'd appreciate it if you'd look after him for a while."

I hated to admit it, but hallowyrms were supposed to bless the land on which they lived. They were even said to bless their charges with great bounties of mana.

Elizabeth nodded. "I know. Don't worry, I'll treat him well."

The crazed fear rapidly faded from Lars' eyes.

Good, he's back to normal.

I grabbed him and removed him from Elizabeth's lap. He spread his wings and hissed at me, but Elizabeth scolded him for his rudeness, and he calmed down.

I turned to Raphael. "Now, about that fellwyrms scale—as it happens, Leohardt stole one during his visit. I've been keeping it safely in the palace."

His eyes widened, and he clapped with glee. "Really?! Why, I knew you were my favorite prince!"

Hey now. What did I tell you about composing yourself in front of Elizabeth?

I didn't mind too much, as Elizabeth pondered my words. Just as she had likely thought, it was the same scale that Marquis Vilienne used against us in Orion. It had to have come from Lars.

I leaned down to the little dragon's ear.

"Leohardt told me everything, you little creep," I whispered. "You traded one of your scales for that handkerchief Elizabeth touched, didn't you?"

He averted his gaze. From what I'd heard, the trade hadn't been worth it—Elizabeth found it balled up in a nest Lars had made, and she had it washed and returned to Leohardt immediately. He had lost a scale with nothing to show for it.

As an aside, fellwyrms scales were thought to retain their miasma even after being separated from the dragon. Since Vilienne kept the scale so close to his bare skin, it likely addled his brain and

gave him all manner of delusions. When I asked Leohardt if he had experienced anything similar during his time with the scale, he reported nothing odd despite having touched it repeatedly with his bare hands. In other words, he was too dark and twisted for a fellwyrn to corrupt.

“Don’t you ever try to pull something like that again,” I hissed at the drake. “If you do, I’ll tell Elizabeth, and she’ll nullify your contract on the spot.”

“G-Gwrrm.”

Lars’ tail drooped sadly, and he shot one last reproachful look at me before flying back to his mistress.

Extra 2: Selena and Her Feelings

THAT day, Edward visited the palace with his father to attend military drills. The exercises had just ended, and he was wandering the palace corridors when he met her.

“W-Wahh!!”

A young noblewoman ran out of a room, only to trip on the hem of her own skirt and stumble.

“Look out!” he shouted, extending his arm at the last moment to catch her.

He arrested her fall just as her long, midnight-blue locks grazed the marble floor. She was all too light in his trained arms. He had no issue supporting her weight. The mass of paper she was carrying, however, caught his attention as they tumbled noisily to the floor.

“What’s that?” he wondered aloud.

It seemed to be a book. To his surprise, it was none other than the novel that captured his heart and imagination alike one short year ago—*Even the Stars Cry for the Holy Maiden*. It was one of the original printings, no less. A few other papers were scattered with the book, among which was a detailed drawing of a black dragon.

Before he could pick up the drawing for a closer look, the young lady he’d saved squirmed out of his grasp and scooped up her load. She then turned to him and bowed deeply.

“Th-Thank you very much for helping me! I’m so sorry I caused you such trouble!”

“No, it’s fine. Are you all right? I hope your book is undamaged.”

The first edition was quite rare. Only a few hundred of them were ever printed. For most novels, that was a respectable amount in and of itself, but the first volume of *Star Maiden* had been printed dozens of times since its original release.

The maiden wordlessly bowed again and again before hurrying on her way. Something about the way she moved was oddly charming.

"That was Baron Haven's daughter, wasn't it?" Edward's father asked.

He recognized the name. Lars Drewleid had screamed her name during the Coming-of-Age Ball fiasco the previous year if he remembered correctly.

"Lady Selena, wasn't it?" Edward mused to himself.

"Do you know her?"

"O-Only by name."

His words wouldn't come out right for some reason. The *Star Maiden* incident brought back no shortage of unpleasant memories. He had worried his father a great deal back then. Even now, he shuddered to think of what he might have done if the crown prince hadn't brought the Academy to its senses. He was chasing that Yulisse girl for some incomprehensible reason—most of the details were blurry, as though he had dreamt it. Vincent's efforts ensured that most of the parents were ignorant of the whole affair, though, and as a result, he knew little that didn't immediately concern him.

The name Selena Haven was just one of many details that were nearly lost in the chaos. She was the object of some amount of pity from her peers, given the abuse they assumed she'd suffered at Lars' hands, but she graduated soon after and disappeared from their minds.

From the looks of it, Selena was a *Star Maiden* fan herself. If not, she wouldn't have held her first edition with such measured care. High society kept the series at arms' length as of late, but she had the courage to be open with her preferences. He also believed in hating the sin instead of the sinner—or rather, the sinner instead of the series.

I hope I can chat with her about it someday, he found himself thinking.



THEIR second meeting happened sooner than Edward had hoped. He ran into her on a visit to the Royal Library. She had a look of great concentration on her face as she gathered an impressive tower of books. Against his better judgment, he drew closer to watch her. She would flip through the books, and as soon as she found what she was looking for, she would copy down the page on a fresh sheet

of paper.

He couldn't look away from her delicate, practiced handwriting. She was clearly used to scribe work. Even the charts and figures she copied were immaculate. Selena was creating art before his very eyes. Then he watched as she stretched in an unladylike manner, and he couldn't help but chuckle good-naturedly at the sight.

Perhaps alerted by his laugh, she looked up at him. It was hard to tell where she was looking through the forest of her bangs, but their eyes probably met. Either way, his cover was blown. She sprang to her feet, but in the process, she knocked her chair back so that it threatened to fall. He caught it at the last moment.

She was evidently a bit of a klutz.

"Y-You're—!" she started.

"It's a pleasure to see you again. I am Edward Norden."

"N-No, um, the pleasure's all mine! My name is Selena Haven. Thank you so much for helping me the other day." She repeated her dipping bows again, then thought better of it a moment later and dipped low in a proper curtsy. "I-I'm so sorry for my earlier rudeness! It's a bad habit of mine to bow like that whenever I'm startled..."

"Please, no need to apologize."

He wondered where she'd picked up such an otherworldly habit, but if he asked, she'd likely feel worse about it. Something else attracted his attention far more. Laying among the scattered tomes on the table was *Star Maiden*. His heart skipped a beat. He couldn't be frank with his father, but he was still a fan of the series.

Selena paused for a moment to think. "Lord Norden... Where have I...?" Finally, she recalled what was troubling her, and her eyes went to *Star Maiden*. Evidently, she remembered his unfortunate history with Yulisse. "I-I'm so sorry!" she apologized. "I'll put this away right now!"

She hurriedly stuffed the book into her bag. She was worried he had unpleasant memories of those days, which was true to an extent. Watching her hide *Star Maiden* on account of that was far worse.

He glanced about to ensure nobody was close enough to overhear him. "Please don't apologize. I was honestly being quite the fool back then, and it was no one's fault but my own. I couldn't possibly blame a book, especially one as wonderful as that. Why,

I've never felt so moved by a story."

Selena stared at him slack-jawed. Her eyes were probably as wide as saucers somewhere behind all that hair.

A few moments of silence passed. Selena lowered her head, preventing him from seeing her face altogether. He got the impression that she was blushing.



EDWARD and Selena began exchanging letters. Every time he looked at her letters, her talents blew him away anew. Not only was her penmanship superb, but she always had an apt topic to discuss and a slew of well-conceived devices to make it an entertaining read. Even if she was only making idle talk, like commenting on the flowers in her family's garden or informing him that her dog had given birth, she made everything unfold like chapters of a grand story.

If only she were a tad more composed in person.

They were both busy enough to prevent them from talking directly, so it was only after two months of back-and-forth letters that they could meet again.

Selena had grown thinner since Edward last saw her and had impressive bags under her eyes. She seemed worn out, but even then, he couldn't suppress his excitement. *Star Maiden's* sequel had finally been published. As he crowed about it, however, she only smiled haggardly.

"I'm glad you liked it," she said.

The distance between them had been slowly but surely shrinking. Selena was no longer so jumpy and ill-at-ease around him, which was an oddly pleasant feeling. She even actively shared her favorite scenes and lines from *Star Maiden* with him.

When word reached them that a saint had fought off a fellwyrn attack in the neighboring kingdom, Selena nearly fainted on the spot, but that meant she was as amazed at the romantic and fantastic nature of real life as Edward himself was. As soon as he heard the news from his father, he knew Selena would find it every bit as wonderful. She shared little about herself, but he knew she was a genuine fan of the books.

"A f-fellwyrn?" she repeated in confusion when she heard. She

sounded a tad lightheaded.

He nodded energetically. “Yes! A real, live dragon! They even say that Orion’s Prince Malius and Lady Lecia—you know, the girl who was at the Academy—are quite fond of *Star Maiden* themselves. Who knows, maybe those books were the key to learning to believe in themselves? No, that has to be it, I’m sure!”

He knew firsthand how powerful that book could be. If she wasn’t a nubile young lady, he would’ve taken her hands and gone to any lengths to convince her.

“Some people use the power of fiction for evil,” he continued enthusiastically, “but they’re a genuine source of courage and hope for people across the country! *Star Maiden* teaches people just how potent the power of love can be!”

Edward felt the blood rush to his face and clenched his fists in excitement.

Selena shakily stood up, her cheeks flushed pink. “D-Do you really like it that much, Lord Edward?”

“Of course! I know how strange that must sound, given the humiliation I was put through because of it. I’ll admit that for a while, I wished I’d never read it. But looking back at it now, seeing the heroine’s earnest, heartfelt efforts to carve a better future for herself and grow as a person has reassured me in my darkest hours.”

He’d told her the same thing many, many times already, but it still didn’t feel like enough. Every time he felt stymied by his lack of growth or his immaturity, he would read *Star Maiden* again, cover to cover. It was brilliant *because* the ending was so standard and happy. It always left him feeling reenergized and refreshed. He believed the author’s good intentions were packed into every word.

Edward looked back at Selena. Her near-fainting spell had mussed her hair, and he could see more of her face than usual. For the first time, he saw the clarity and depth in her beautiful indigo eyes. They almost twinkled like the night sky as they caught the light. She quickly brought a handkerchief to her eyes and averted her gaze.

What he failed to notice was the intense pounding of his heart. It was far more than any time he’d read *Star Maiden* or even the first time he was entranced by her.

Selena dried her tears and smiled at him. “I still have a first-edition copy at home,” she finally said. “You can have it if you’d

like.”

“R-Really?! You bought two?! B-But no, I couldn’t possibly. You’re saving that one in mint condition, aren’t you?”

“Oh, uh... I have five copies, actually, so don’t worry about it.”

“You what...?!”

Just one copy was worth a king’s ransom, but *five*? Even if they were cheap, that didn’t make sense—their low price was one of the reasons they sold out so quickly. She must’ve had a vision of the future to buy so many.

“Lady Selena,” he said as he gazed into her eyes, “I swear I’ll treasure it more than my own life.”

She smiled back at him. “I’ll bring you a copy when we next meet, then.”

Her bangs covered her eyes again, but he could easily envision the sea of stars in her eyes.

The next day, Selena brought one of her first editions to the Norden mansion, just as she said she would. His fingers grazed hers when she passed him the book, and he nearly dropped *Star Maiden* on the spot despite himself.

Edward later reread the book to the point of nearly memorizing it, at which point he noticed many of the same expressions were used in Selena’s letters to him and, inevitably, why she seemed to enjoy talking with him so much (and in the process, solved the mystery of her five copies), but that was a tale for another, much later day.

Extra 3: The Prince Dreams of a Kiss

AFTER nine long years of frustration, Elizabeth and I were finally, *finally* lovers.

We're in love. Engaged. Oh, it sounds sweeter than I'd imagined. Nothing could be better. Nothing could more aptly show that we are genuinely in love.

We had gone on undercover dates before and even attended parties as a couple, and for a while, just being engaged was enough. But there was something else that we could only do now.

We had yet to kiss.

Ever since that fateful day, Elizabeth's courage officially took us beyond merely future husband and wife, and I wanted nothing more than just that.

Step one: gather intelligence.

"Have you ever kissed before?" I asked Harold with the most serious look I could muster.

I knew he would brush me off for being foolish again, but he was the only one I could ask for help. I'd stumbled into my relationship with Elizabeth by sheer luck, and one innocent little question couldn't hurt.

However, Harold turned beet red. That was the answer in and of itself. I had never even considered that he might answer me with such a serious yes.

"You... You've kissed someone, then?" I muttered, unable to process what was unfolding.

Harold furrowed his brow. "It was an accident, I assure—"

"You *did* kiss someone, then!"

"We were sparring, and my partner wanted to try out a new techn—"

"Oh. So you did kiss."

"It was an *accident*."

"But you did it, didn't you?"

"Accidentally."

Harold sighed and covered his face with a gloved hand. The

tips of his ears were bright red, however.

But his sparring partner, eh? I know they're engaged, but I wasn't expecting something so lewd from the two of them. Did they happen to bump into each other? Or, wait, could that be the true identity of Lady Margaret's ultimate attack? Are servants supposed to have better luck in love than their own masters?

As I mulled over the possibilities, I noticed he was silent. Finally, he let out another sigh.

"I'll have to talk to Margaret about this," was all he said.

"Please do."

I nodded seriously, even though he was still covering his face. It was clear what he had to talk to her about.

I'll need all the help I can get if I want to be more intimate with Elizabeth.



THE next week, an interesting rumor ran rampant through the Academy's halls.

Apparently, first kisses tasted like strawberries.

It took the full power of House Abarakoff's spymasters and House Falming's order of elite women bodyguards, but with their combined efforts, the rumor spread like wildfire amongst the young ladies of the school. Tensions were at an all-time high.

"I heard it's sweet but sour, and that you never forget it."

"Oh? I heard it tasted like lemon."

"I do hope it's more like strawberries than lemons."

A group of ladies discussed the rumors. They were pivotal in passing the gossip on to Elizabeth to tempt her sweet tooth. Nonetheless, they seemed to be enjoying themselves.

I just know Elizabeth will fall for it.

It was a roundabout strategy, granted, but with any luck, it would make Elizabeth think more about our relationship. It just might pay off.

Of course, I've captured quite a few imaginations around the school, some of which shouldn't be stimulated any more than they already are.

Case in point: it was getting more difficult to ignore Raphael from where he was squirming and grinning in the seat beside mine.

"Oh, what a hopelessly romantic rumor!" he said with an elated sigh.

"What are you getting so hot and bothered over?" I snapped. "You've kissed a hundred girls before, haven't you?"

"Of course, I haven't. After all, any little kitten I kissed wouldn't be able to forget me for as long as she lived, and I can't have that."

His answer raised more questions than it answered, but I didn't need to know more.

"Besides," he continued, "nobles can be quite prudish when it comes to things like this—you know, modesty, self-control, all that nonsense. Only a kiss with your fiancée might be acceptable, and that's *might*, mind you."

I glanced back at Harold to find him cradling his head in his hands. Being implicitly called a playboy by the most licentious man in school had to be giving him a monstrous headache.

What's past is past, Harold. Put it behind you.

The real problem was me. I had yet to taste the forbidden fruit, and I craved it all the more now.



WITH both our parents' permission, Elizabeth and I began having dates in the palace every weekend. We followed a consistent pattern: first, a tour around the gardens, then a stop by the gazebo beside the lake for some sweets until sunset came and it was time for her to return home. Watching the slow change in the garden's landscape with the passing of the seasons—and a dedicated team of gardeners—was a simple way to spend the time, but we thoroughly enjoyed our idle chatter. Just breathing the same air as her was inexplicably relaxing.

As we walked, I recalled one of the gardeners' recommendations: that the maple had begun to take on its autumnal palette. I directed Elizabeth to a small path through the maples as we talked. I held out my hand to her, and she readily took it. Normally, I would be expected to escort her properly, but I was content as we were.

Elizabeth averted her gaze from me as we walked, and I pretended not to notice. If I acted bashful, her own embarrassment

would only worsen.

Wait, what if she's hiding her disgust from me? She could easily hate this, and she's only putting on a brave front. That would be very much like her.

I recalled Raphael's words about how even a kiss between an engaged couple was borderline taboo and glanced over to see what I could glean from her expression. Her eyes were downcast, and she seemed to be staring at her hand in mine. As I watched, her lips parted into a bashful smile.

Good HEAVENS!!

I hurriedly faced forward, desperately willing my legs to stay firm beneath me. If I acted strangely, she would release my hand.

We walked in silence—but in that silence lay genuine bliss. We matched our speed, our pace, and our very breaths with one another, taking in the sights and sounds of the garden as one. Our feelings for each other were made clear by our hands alone.

I know I've thought this a hundred times before, but I'm so glad I told her how I feel.

We took our time reaching the gazebo. No maids were there, just as I'd instructed, and Harold had disappeared somewhere along the way. The only indication I'd had of his presence was a feeling of being watched as my knees trembled—he was no doubt irked by my helplessness. What a kind, caring manservant.

I sat beside her at the table instead of across from her, as I usually did. I had bench seating prepared for that purpose.

Elizabeth's eyes lit up at the sight of the fruit on the table. It was arranged in a bowl in the center, neatly accented with flowers.

"Wow!" she breathed as she took a fruit. "It's like a big, round ruby!"

"Go on, take a bite."

She did exactly that, leaving a neat bitemark in it as she eagerly chewed. Something about her attitude reminded me of a squirrel.

She's so adorable!

As my heart melted, she swallowed and let out a sigh of contentment.

"It's not too sweet, and the flesh is so tender. It's simply delicious!"

"They're a special variety I ordered from the south," I replied.

"They're marvelous in desserts, of course, but I wanted you to try

them in their purest form.”

She nodded. “Such perfect timing, too—all the talk of strawberries left me craving them ever so badly.” As soon as she realized the potential implications of what she said, she blushed and averted her gaze.

The fruits I had prepared for her were strawberries. This particular strain—a new crop from the south—was so round they were nearly spherical, as well as being a beautiful shade of crimson. They had just enough acidity to accent their sweetness to a T.

Elizabeth glanced up at me as I took an ample bite of one, feigning perfect innocence. It was all I could do to keep my racing heart in check. She reached for another fruit, but something made her stop.

“Oh!”

Finally, she spotted the purple glass rabbit—the one she had bought me—hidden within the bowl. I had enlisted its services in my scheme.

“I have mine with me as well,” she said as she reached into a small pouch. Sure enough, it was her matching figurine, with glass the same shade as my eyes. She placed it on the table, then plucked mine from the fruit bowl to join its mate. “Sorry, little ones. You haven’t seen each other in some time, have you?” She giggled. “Aren’t they sweet together, Prince Vincent?”

She turned to look at me, and our eyes met. In an instant, I lost myself in those limpid pools of amethyst. My face was uncompromisingly stiff, but I couldn’t relax.

“Elizabeth...no, Liza.”

“Yes, Prince Vince?”

I drew closer to her, just like the rabbits. I reverently fingered a lock of her silky golden hair as my eyes were drawn to her soft pink lips.

“I love you, Liza.”

“Y-Your Royal Highness,” she muttered restlessly.

Evidently, my intent had gotten across to her. Her eyes pleaded with me as her cheeks flushed strawberry pink with warmth.

So she isn’t opposed to the idea, then...right? I’m not misunderstanding her, am I?

I threaded my arm behind her along the back of the bench to gauge her reaction, pulling myself slightly closer to her. She didn’t

break eye contact with me, much less attempt to put distance between us.

Can I take this as a yes? I can kiss her now, can't I? Oh, why am I getting cold feet now, of all times?!

I could've slugged myself in the gut. Fortunately, the mental image alone was sobering enough. I smiled with all the fake ease in the world as I pulled her shoulders closer to me. A sweet aroma tickled my nostrils, coming not from the strawberries but from her hair. It was the unmistakable scent of myrrh and roses.

"Liza," I whispered, losing myself ever deeper in her eyes. Slowly, my face drew closer to hers.

Wait. Something's off.

She was looking back into my eyes, and I could feel the love she held for me within them. Elizabeth was clearly waiting for me to kiss her.

But I can't look her in the eyes as I kiss her, can I? Wouldn't our noses bump into each other?

I suddenly realized that I was woefully unprepared and underinformed in regard to the crucial act itself. My shock at hearing of Harold's own experience must have scrambled my brain.

It's over. I'm hopeless. I can't.

I softly closed my eyes before avoiding her mouth entirely, instead planting my lips softly on her cheek. She was startlingly warm to the touch. I lingered for only a moment before pulling away and opening my eyes.

Elizabeth didn't move a muscle. Then she slowly brought her hand to her cheek, bashfully. She looked back at me.

"The rumors were right," she whispered with a short, sweet sigh. "One's first kiss *does* taste like strawberries."

That wasn't what the rumors had been referring to, but even though I was too much of a coward to follow through properly, she was a believer. Her sweetness had turned my failure into a success.

What now, though? It took me nine years to tell her I love her. How long am I supposed to wait until I can kiss her?

At that moment, the sun seemed to go dark. Elizabeth had stood up, leaning over me and casting my face in shadow. Her hand alighted on my shoulder like a dove, and as she bent over, the pleats of her skirt grazed my legs. Before I could process what was happening, her face filled my field of vision entirely. The last thing I remembered was how long her eyelashes were as she tenderly

closed her eyes.

Before I could process what was happening, something as soft as cotton candy brushed against my cheek, but left before I could truly appreciate it.

What...just happened?

She reopened her eyes, and our gazes met. Instantly, she blushed a few shades redder and buried her face in her hands.

"I-I'm so sorry! I...I've never done anything like this before! I could never dream of doing it as elegantly as you!"

I had to say something, but words had left me. I couldn't thank her—that was too direct, let alone the almost mercenary lewdness it implied. The silence was so awkward, I couldn't believe I was savoring it mere moments before. It was sweet, but a bit too sour to bear.

"I'll see you later!" she finally exclaimed before bolting from the gazebo and running down the cobbled garden path as quickly as her legs would take her.

I extended my hand to stop her, but it was too late. I hadn't the faintest idea what to say, even if she did stop.

"Harold," I finally said.

In seconds, he was at my side once more. "You called?"

"I'm sorry, but could you see Elizabeth to the gate? Oh, and take her rabbit to her."

After he accepted the figurine, he shot me an inquisitive look. "May I ask why you don't wish to accompany her yourself?"

"Don't worry, I'll write her a letter later. I, well..."

I attempted to push off of the bench, but I was still too weak-kneed to stand.

Harold finally understood the situation, his gaze turning into a petrifying glare.

"I-I can't stand," I explained pitifully.

"Very well. I suppose I have my orders, then."

While I waited for him to return, I gazed up at the sky and took in the wonderful scent of the strawberries.

I wonder if every day will be this wonderful once we're married.

We were finally making progress, but a slight breeze had bowled me over completely.

My heart won't last at this rate.

If nothing else, though, Elizabeth's manners were impeccable. She always returned her hellos and goodbyes in kind, responded to

gifts with gifts of her own, and responded to “I love you” with her own shows of love. I should’ve known that she would respond to a kiss in kind, but it took a terrific jolt to realize that. I could only imagine what might happen between us next.

Volume 2, Fin

Extra Short Story: The Prince Dreams of a Kiss, Cont'd

EVEN after I recovered from Elizabeth's counterattack enough to stand, I was horribly distracted. It took all my strength to hobble to my bedroom, whereupon I collapsed into a chair and stared at the ceiling for a long while.

I had finally kissed Elizabeth. She had even kissed me back.

No, that didn't count. That wasn't what I had in mind at all. We exchanged kisses on the cheek; that's all.

I took a deep breath. I had to calm down and analyze the damage done. They say telling someone to relax is counterproductive, but they never met someone as hell-bent on relaxing as I was. I had no one to distract me, after all.

Firstly, I was unable to kiss Elizabeth on the lips. That was a critical failing.

Secondly, Elizabeth was even cuter than usual when she kissed me.

The latter was infinitely more important. I grew weak at the very thought of her. She had officially surpassed the limits of what my mortal mind could comprehend. Any attempt to puzzle my way around the predicament resulted in my brain jellifying, no matter how hard I tried. I would try to think of ways to kiss her properly, realize that all the stage actors I'd seen had tilted their heads to avoid each other's noses, reason that I could do the same with Elizabeth, and then I would white out on the spot.

I'm ages away from kissing her for real, aren't I?

As I stared at the ceiling in growing despair, a sloppy knock came at the door. It wasn't Harold—it was a knock with only the most basic courtesy, there to announce one's presence rather than ask for permission.

I've got a bad feeling about this.

Sure enough, the door opened without my consent to reveal my mother. I reflexively fixed my posture and stood up.

"Is anything the matter?" I asked her.

"I just ran into Lady Elizabeth," Mother said with a faint frown. "I was surprised that you weren't there, so I figured I should discover why you would treat the dear girl so poorly."

"Well..."

I fumbled to find an excuse, but the cold light in her eyes forbade anything but the truth. Worse yet, she realized the reason before I could say a thing.

"You have something red on your cheek," she said coldly.

"D-Do I?"

I raised my kerchief to my face but stopped.

Should I really wipe it away? I can't just not wash my face ever again. It's bound to come off at some point.

Even so, I wanted the last vestige of Elizabeth's presence at the palace to remain for as long as possible. That was only natural.

"I lied," Mother said matter-of-factly. "What were you thinking just now?"

I didn't reply.

"No matter," she continued with a nod. "I'll consider it enough that you two are getting along."

She knows exactly what happened, doesn't she?

She narrowed her eyes. "I must remind you, however, that you *must* remain composed at all times. Not seeing your own fiancée off properly is a serious offense."

"O-Of course."

It was impossible to play dumb now. All I could do was shut my insolent mouth and agree.

Mother crossed her arms imperiously as she looked around my bedroom. "Did you do the image training you always do? All one hundred times?"

"N-No, I typically do ten thousand, since a hundred is never enough. How did you know I do that?"

She didn't reply. Of course she didn't. Nonetheless, I suppressed my mounting terror to slowly shake my head no. I'd considered kissing an imaginary partner, but there was a critical issue with that.

"Image training with my confession was one thing," I explained, "but I couldn't possibly do the same with kissing. That would be akin to betraying Elizabeth."

It was the greatest form of cheating I could conceive. Even imagining kissing Elizabeth felt heretical.

Mother wrinkled her nose at me in repulsion. Unfortunately, she was objectively right. I was strange to feel that way.

“Why don’t you practice with Elizabeth herself?” she finally suggested. “It’s better than using your imagination, anyway.”

“W-With her?!” I stammered in terror as my brain became pudding. The last thing I remembered before fainting was Mother watching me with disapproval, arms still crossed as I fell.



AT the start of the next school week, I was still as bereft of ideas as ever. When I saw Elizabeth, however, she requested we meet in private, whereupon she said the last thing I was expecting.

“At this rate, I fear we may not be able to kiss properly at our wedding. Would you, um, care to practice with me?”

With that, I once again fainted on the spot.

Afterword

HELLO again, Shakushineko here. How did you enjoy volume two of *Lovestruck Prince: I'll Fight the Heroine for My Villainess Fiancée!*? I feel like I once again wrote something to appeal to my own tastes, but I hope you enjoyed it.

I was content with this volume since I was able to use both an evil dragon plotline and have the “villainess” play the villain. I also enjoyed writing about the villainess getting along so well with the heroine—though I realize the second half of the title doesn’t quite fit the story anymore. After all, I initially only planned for the story to be a single volume.

As I was writing, though, I felt sorry for poor Vincent, having to react so fully to not only Elizabeth and Raphael this time around, but also Lecia and Leohardt—and that’s without even mentioning Harold or Lars. Speaking of Lars, I originally planned on having him speak when he got enough mana, just like the black cat did in the first volume, but I knew he’d be a little too talkative for his own good, so I silenced him. Sorry, little guy, it’s for the best.

Lars and Leohardt were written to be foils for Vincent. In the first volume, Lars fell in love with Elizabeth just like Vincent, but he tried to make her life worse instead of improving himself. Leohardt was different in that he actively worked on his persona as Vincent did, but he failed to balance that with his inner obsessions. I feel like they both improved somewhat through their relationships with Elizabeth and Vincent, though.

This time around, I’d also like to announce the manga version’s release through *MAGCOMI*’s website through the talents of Mimu Oyamada. New chapters are slated to release on the 15th of each month. The characters are all drawn so charmingly, and they’re even more lively than in my novels! The first volume was released in June 2022, and Vincent is certainly put to work! If you read the manga version after this, I’m sure you’ll be moved by how much Vincent and Elizabeth have grown since then. I certainly was. If you’re able to check it out, I highly recommend it!

To cap things off, I'd like to thank everyone involved in the production of this volume. Once again, Yukiko's art was spot-on, and my editor was always able to put a smile on my face when I was feeling discouraged. I'd also like to thank the publishing staff and readers alike. Whether you've been here since the first volume or are new to the story, I really appreciate you.

Well, then—until we meet again!

April 1st, 2021
Shakushineko





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A feisty alchemist gets a tsundere enemy general to help her collect resources! Will she be able to tame him?!

THE DO-OVER DAMSEL CONQUERS THE DRAGON EMPEROR

STORY BY: SARASA NAGASE
ILLUSTRATION BY: MITSUYA FUJI
SERIES | VOL. 1 OUT NOW

A young woman with overpowered magic gets sent back 6 years after being killed. She takes this second chance at life to get with her greatest enemy, the dragon emperor!



REVOLUTIONARY REPRISE OF THE BLUE ROSE PRINCESS

STORY BY: ROKU KANAME
ILLUSTRATION BY: HAZUKI FUTABA
SERIES / VOL. 1 OUT NOW

She was a queen who died during a revolution. Now she's gone back in time. Her first course of action? Changing her fate by winning over the revolutionary mastermind!



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THE REINCARNATED VILLAINESS WON'T SEEK REVENGE

STORY BY: AKAKO
ILLUSTRATION BY: HAZUKI FUTABA
SERIES | OUT NOW!

After being wrongly executed as a villainess, Mary reincarnates years later in the same world. Will she seek revenge or live in peace this time?

THE INVISIBLE WALLFLOWER
MARRIES AN UPSTART ARISTOCRAT
AFTER GETTING DUMPED FOR HER SISTER!

STORY BY: MAKINO MAEBARU
ILLUSTRATION BY: MURASAKI SHIDO
SERIES | OUT NOW!

Can an ordinary aristocrat and
a nouveau riche tsundere find
love in an unconsummated
marriage?!



I'LL USE THIS DO-OVER TO BECOME THE IDEAL LADY'S MAID!

STORY BY: SAKI ICHIBU
ILLUSTRATION BY: COCOSUKE
ONESHOT | OUT NOW!

When a time traveler realizes she can
change the past after dedicating her life in
service to her country, she decides to
pursue her dreams the second time
around!



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